

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Over 20 National Guard Soldiers Have Yet To Be Paid For Hurricane-Related Work; Over 290 Still Owed Checks

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ST. THOMAS -- "Pass on a message for me. Tell the remaining 12 National Guard troops that have not been paid, to get their I-9 information in so we can pay them."

Those were the words of Governor Kenneth Mapp while speaking during his State of the Territory Address in January ([See page 25](#)). The governor was relaying a message that he said came from Gen. Howell, which gave the impression that the Guard was near its goal of paying all soldiers. But since that time, The Consortium has received messages from soldiers that those comments were disingenuous, and during a Committee on

Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety hearing on Thursday, Gen. Howell revealed the true figures: Over 20 soldiers have yet to be paid for their work during and after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, while over 290 were still owed some payment. Gen. Howell said the Guard has set a target date of March 15, 2018, to pay all soldiers.

For lawmakers who make up the committee in which the hearing was held, the news was unacceptable. "I have over 200 people that are complaining from the Guard that they have not gotten paid between September 29 to November 1 [2017]. So I'm not going to just drop them because you're giving me a load of qualifications which we are already aware of, that's why we voted to make you general," said Senator Alicia Hansen, addressing Gen. Howell.

Senator Novelle Francis said the issue could not simply be dismissed because inquiries about the matter by residents calling his office was overwhelming. Senator Janette Millin Young said, "We can't have excuses for not paying our soldiers."

Part of the problem, according to Gen. Howell, was uncertainty within the Guard on what pay scale the soldiers should be compensated, since there are multiple levels through which compensation could be calculated. Senators Francis and Brian Smith, who chairs the committee, suggested paying soldiers on the highest level, since the funds would be reimbursable by the federal government. However, Gen. Howell expressed some reservation with that idea, stating that the federal government does not cover payment costs for certain local events such as carnival, and that it would be difficult for the local government to meet such high pay levels. "We are a very expensive force and one of the highest paid in the nation," Gen. Howell said.

The potential fix

There's a bill in the Senate that seeks to set the pay rate for guardsmen. The measure is supported by Gen. Howell, and she asked that senators support it as well, suggesting that inaction would only compound the problem. "If this body does not address Bill No. 32-0045 to change the law or to vote annually on what the pay raise will be and remove any ambiguity, we will not resolve that pay dilemma" at the Virgin Islands National Guard, she said. "I mean, I walked here I have like three or four pay scales, and that's unfortunate because your interpretation, mine -- the law is so ambiguous that all of us here at the table can come up with a different pay scale and that's not fair to us as an organization, and definitely not fair to me as a leader."

Mr. Francis was in support of the Senate visiting the bill, but expressed some reservations as to how it should be implemented.

Opening of soldiers' checks

Mrs. Hansen took issue with reports that the Guard had opened the checks of some soldiers, which was confirmed by Gen. Howell. "With all the qualifications you have, you must know that you are not authorized to open anybody's checks; that's against federal law," Mrs. Hansen said. "You're not authorized to open anybody's mail. You can request that they provide you with a copy if they want to, but you cannot open anybody's mail."

General Howell said it was the only way Guard officials could have gotten the information they needed, but her response only drew the ire of Mrs. Hansen, who warned the general

not to engage in such action moving forward.

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