

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Forde Confirms Wife's 60-Day Suspension And Order To Repay \$8,000; Says He Plans To Sue D.O.E., VI Consortium

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ST. THOMAS -- Senator Jean Forde told The Virgin Islands Daily News on Friday that his wife was being unfairly targeted for \$8,000 that was stolen from the Adelita Cancryn Junior High School's office, where Mrs. Forde serves as principal, and said they planned on suing the Department of Education (D.O.E.) as well as the Virgin Islands Consortium for libel, after The Consortium reported that Mrs. Forde was under investigation by D.O.J. relative to funds that went missing from the school's vault.

"We stand 100 percent by our story as well as our veritable D.O.J. source that made us aware of the investigation," said Ernice Gilbert, the online paper's founder. "We believe the story falls in the realm of public service journalism, and we will continue to bring to light matters we believe are of public interest."

In a release responding to The Consortium report, Mr. Forde never gave the impression that his wife was suspended by D.O.E. for 60 days, and suggested that the article was in response to his criticism of D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum at a hearing a few weeks ago.

Mr. Forde made available to The Daily News a police report filed by Officer Patrick Smith indicating that Mrs. Forde called police to report a burglary on September 27. She told police that she locked and secured the school's office building at 5:30 p.m. on September 15 -- four days before Hurricane Maria, [which affected St. Croix the most on September 19.](#)

According to the Daily News, citing the police report, Mrs. Forde told police she returned to the building on September 27 only to see that her office had been burglarized and the vault open, according to the report. Mrs. Forde told police that she asked one of the workmen what took place, and she said the workman told her that he had seen five young men climbing around the back window of the office building.

Officer Smith quoted Mrs. Forde as saying, "He did not think anything of it because of the severe damage of the building."

The report says suspects probably scaled the south wall of the office to enter through a broken window. The report was filed by Officer Smith on October 5, 2017, according to the local paper.

Mr. Forde said his wife was notified by D.O.E. last week that she had been placed on a 60-day leave without pay, and ordered to repay the \$8,000. The senator did not provide The Daily News with contact information for his wife, stating, "I don't think that she will speak, because we have hired an attorney and once we have an attorney, the attorney will speak for her. I can speak because I'm a public figure," he said, according to The Daily News.

Attorney General Claude Walker on Wednesday told The Consortium that the department's policy prohibits him from commenting on ongoing investigations, therefore, details could not be provided. On Thursday, D.O.J. issued the following statement to The Consortium: "Attorney General Walker can confirm that the Department of Justice is investigating a Department of Education employee in the St. Thomas-St. John District regarding missing funds. We cannot provide further information at this time, as the investigation is ongoing."

A trusted, well-placed D.O.J. source employed at the institution, who requested anonymity because of strict confidentiality policies set in place by Mr. Walker, told The Consortium that Mrs. Forde was being investigated, and suggested that the matter was serious enough for D.O.J. to dedicate resources to it. "With the amount of things happening in the Virgin Islands, if this case wasn't serious, D.O.J. would not be investigating it," this person said.

On Friday, Mr. Walker told The Daily News that an investigation into the burglary was underway. "It is being investigated by the department, to be forthcoming with the public if we are conducting an investigation. When you're dealing with public funds, typically we are looking into the department." Mr. Walker said the case is being investigated by the department's white-collar crime (public corruption) unit. He added that the unit gets involved whenever public funds go missing.

And Mr. Walker said the investigation into the burglary had not been launched as a result of the police report. "It's not through the police department, it's not by way of a police report," he told The Daily News. "We receive a lot of confidential tips and other sources."

Similar to the response he gave to The Consortium, Mr. Walker told The Daily News that he would not comment on the investigation. "It's our general policy that we don't get into, we don't discuss whether there's an investigation or not into a particular matter, unless, of course, in this case where there is a report," Mr. Walker said, referring to The Consortium's [original report](#) on the matter.

Mr. Forde told the paper he believes the suspension of his wife from the school and order to pay back the \$8,000, was retribution for a heated back and forth with Ms. McCollum at a hearing regarding an informal agreement between Ms. McCollum and a storage company in October, according to The Daily News.

He told the paper that Ms. McCollum said she had an informal agreement with a private company to store salvaged inventory from Cost-U-Less at the Benjamin Oliver Elementary School in exchange for free cleaning supplies for all schools. Mr. Forde said he pointed out the matter to Ms. McCollum. "Dr. McCollum apparently became very irate that I pointed it out," the senator said. He said the commissioner cancelled the agreement and paid for the supplies. However, he challenged the claim, stating, according to The Daily News, "Based on the limited investigation that I have done so far, no check has been issued."

Mr. Forde went on to tell that paper that Ms. McCollum is "petty," and that she oftentimes seek to find out who told him about issues within D.O.E.

Ms. McCollum declined to provide a comment to the paper, stating, "I absolutely have no comment on that."