The Virgin Islands Consortium

Unemployment Territory-Wide At 9.5 Percent. It Was 18 Percent After Hurricanes Irma And Maria, Labor Officials Say.

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One of the main indicators of an economy's health is its unemployment rate. Since the former HOVENSA refinery shuttered in 2012, the U.S. Virgin Islands has struggled with double digit unemployment on a territorial level.

But during a budget hearing in the Committee on Finance held at the Legislature in St. Thomas on Thursday, Department of Labor (D.O.L.) officials told lawmakers that the number of unemployed Virgin Islanders looking for jobs had dropped to 9.5 percent, which is still high but lower than the 11 percent Labor officials said it stood at before

Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and much lower than the 18 percent it peaked at following the 2017 storms.

D.O.L. Director of Labor Statistics, Gary Haylard, told lawmakers that the number of Virgin Islanders seeking employment fluctuates based on the positions available. He said the more positions that are available, the more individuals who apply. However, fewer people seek contractual job opportunities, Mr. Haylard made known.

Governor Kenneth Mapp has long said that construction jobs would drive the economy for the next few years, as work spurred through federal dollars already set aside for the territory continue to pour in. And job opportunities at the Limetree Bay Terminals, where oil refining is set for 2020 and a ramp up in work later this year in preparation of the 2020 restart, will help in further lowering the unemployment rate. The turnaround period scheduled for later this year will require 1,300 new workers.

Elsewhere, D.O.L. has had trouble utilizing federal funding, and it recently lost $34,000 in federal dollars for The Workforce Grant, a grant for adults and youths, and Foreign Labor Grant, according to D.O.L. Acting Commissioner Averil George, the department's most recent leader.

The department's recommended budget for Fiscal Year 2019 is $11,119,439, which Ms. George said includes $10,223,152 from the general fund and $896,287 from the Government Insurance Fund. D.O.L.'s total non-appropriated local funding is $801,333 and total non-appropriated federal funding is $6,268,072, for a total budget of $18,188,844.

Also testifying during yesterday's budget hearing were officials from the following government arms:

Virgin Islands Energy Office: Officials sought a recommended budget of $1,125,408, which includes $554,999 for personnel services, $251,568 for fringe benefits, $269,728 for other services, and $21,000 for supplies.

Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs: Officials sought a recommended budget for FY 2019 of $783,625, with $335,544 being set aside for personnel salaries and fringe benefits; $31,081 for operating expenses; $300,000 for medical travel and death benefits; and $117,000 for projected non-appropriated funds from the V.I. Lottery and Taxi-Cab Commission.

Schneider Regional Medical Center: Bernard Wheatley, chief executive officer of S.R.M.C., said the hospital's operational budget for FY 2019 is $28.3 million. In comparison to the FY 2018 budget of $34 million, this is a reduction of $5.6 million, he said. “However, the projected net patient revenue of $33.9 million for FY 2018 has increased because of the federal match for Medicaid to 100%. For FY 2019, S.R.M.C. is estimating net patient revenue of $45.1 million, which includes an estimated additional $4.8 million of revenue from the Medicaid Match,” Dr. Wheatley said.