

The Virgin Islands Consortium

With Base Salaries And Minimum Wage Increased, What Happens To Veteran Employees Making The Same Amount For Years?

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ST. THOMAS -- The territory's chief labor negotiator, Attorney Natalie Nelson Tang How, was pressed by lawmakers during a Tuesday Office of Collective Bargaining (O.C.B.) hearing in the Finance Committee, as senators -- left out of an opportunity to lift the wages of government employees after Governor Kenneth Mapp single-handedly raised the base pay and minimum wage of the executive branch of government by means of executive order -- pressed Mrs. Tang-How on how the government would pay for the increases, and whether Mr. Mapp had violated Virgin Islands law with his executive order.

Asked by Senator Tregenza Roach, who is running as a lieutenant governor candidate with Albert Bryan in the upcoming general election, whether a governor has the authority to unilaterally raise the pay of unionized government employees without going through the collective bargaining negotiation process, Mrs. Tang-How said while salaries have to be negotiated by law (Act 4440), the governor retains the authority to raise the base pay of government employees -- even if it affects unionized employees.

Mr. Roach and other lawmakers also questioned Mrs. Tang-How on the fairness of the governor's executive order, which raised the base pay by \$10,000 for teachers and police officers, for example, but did not address veteran employees who have been receiving pay at the new base rate for years and are owed salary increases, but were left out of the governor's executive order.

"When we speak of parity, how do you expect to go to the bargaining table and to bring the veteran employees up to some appropriate level with the principle of parity operating? How are we going to accomplish that?" asked Mr. Roach.

Mrs. Tang-How said the salary increases via means of the governor's executive order cost the government just under \$12 million. This sum is accounted for according to the Office of Management Budget, with \$15 million set aside to address the increases. "Which means there's a little under \$4 million for everybody else after we've done these initial increases. How can we do this with any kind of parity in mind?" Mr. Roach pressed.

Mrs. Tang-How, pausing for a bit, said union leaders were not debating the governor's base pay and salary increases. Instead, she said, they wanted to start from the governor's recent raises and continue to negotiate from there.

But Mr. Roach said the union leaders -- and senators -- were placed in a difficult position when the governor announced his executive order. "Look at the position you've put them in. Look at the position you've put us in, because we have to sound as if we don't want to pay government employees appropriately, and you're putting on the union leaders to say to you they don't want the start salary because you're not going to be able to give parity with regard to all the members of the bargaining unit.

Governor Mapp's recommended Fiscal Year 2019 budget for O.C.B. totals \$920,913.

The line of questioning was the latest in a debate on Governor Mapp's executive order. During [a press conference last week](#), Attorney General Claude Walker took to a podium at Government House to diminish any doubt that may have formed in the minds of Virgin Islanders following an eight-page legal opinion issued by the 32nd Legislature's legal counsel, which questioned the legality of Mr. Mapp's executive order.

"We feel compelled to come before you today to set the record straight," Mr. Walker said.

The Legislature's [legal opinion](#) contends that unless the funding for the raises provided through the executive order are found in the fiscal year 2018 budget ratified by the Legislature, then the executive order and the salary increases it approves are in violation of Virgin Islands law. Mr. Walker stood in staunch opposition of the opinion, stating that the Revised Organic Act "expressly gives the governor of the Virgin Islands the executive power and authority of general supervisory control over all departments, bureaus, agencies and instrumentalities of the executive branch of the government of the Virgin

Islands."

He said the Revised Organic Act further states that the governor shall maintain the "efficiency of the government and to determine the methods and personnel necessary to conduct the operations of the government and to maintain the efficiency of such operations."

As of August 1, the minimum wage of government employees in the executive branch climbed \$13 per hour or \$27,040 annually. Before the governor's executive order, the minimum wage of government employees stood at \$9.61 per hour, or \$20,000 annually. The minimum wage of private sector employees currently stands at \$10.50 per hour.

Along with the minimum wage increase for government employees, the governor's executive order also increased the starting salary for all departments and agencies, including the Department of Education: Beginning August 1, the starting salary of teachers territory-wide will be \$44,000 annually, or roughly \$21.15 per hour. (If a teacher's base salary is at or above \$44,000 annually, this teacher will see no change in pay, the governor said.)

Teachers have long been calling for a salary increase, and Mr. Mapp is hoping that the base pay raise will help slow the flow of educators who leave the territory for better paying education jobs on the mainland.

Watch: Mapp announces pay increases at press conference

"It's about providing a living wage for workers in the Virgin Islands," the governor said during a press conference at WICO announcing the increases, giving a reason for his momentous action.

Along with the Department of Education, the following departments and agencies were also included in the governor's executive order for base pay increases.

The Department of Health

- Emergency Medical Technician, Basic: \$35,159
- Emergency Medical Technician, Intermediate: \$37,100
- Emergency Medical Technician, Paramedic: \$41,140
- Environmental Officer: \$37,100

The Department of Planning and Natural Resources

- Enforcement Officer Recruit: \$33,000 while on probation; \$38,000 once probation period is completed.
- An Environmental Officer of any rank beneath the rank of chief who completes and maintains an annual certification as a registered EMT, Basic, will receive a salary increase of \$4,500 annually.

The Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs

- Enforcement Officer Recruit: \$33,000 on probation; \$38,000 once probation period is completed.

Bureau of Corrections

- Officer Cadets: \$35,000 on probation; \$40,000 upon completion of probation period
- The salary of a Corrections officer of any rank below chief will increase by \$4,500 annually once this officer completes and maintains EMT, Basic, certification.

VI Fire Service

- Fire Fighter Recruit: \$33,000 during probation period; \$38,000 upon completion of probation.
- The salary of a firefighter in any rank beneath chief increases by \$4,500 if this firefighter is able to maintain EMT, Basic certification.

Virgin Islands Police Department

- Base salary for police officers [was increased from \\$30,715 to \\$40,953 in June](#). However, it was also included in the governor's executive order (albeit at a lesser amount of \$40,000).

Department of Human Services

- Social Worker I: \$45,130
- Social Worker II: \$49,455
- Social Worker III: \$54,180
- Social Worker IV: \$57,395
- Teachers employed with the Department of Human Services (D.H.S.) for the Head Start Program who meet the qualifications as teachers employed at the Department of Education (D.O.E.), shall be paid an annual income equal to the August 1, 2018 base salary at D.O.E. of \$44,000
- Preschool Teacher Assistant at D.H.S. and Head Start: \$35,000

Governor Mapp told The Consortium that the salary increases will be paid for and sustained by economic growth, including the recently ratified oil refining agreement on the south shore of St. Croix, along with economic activity spurred by hurricane recovery projects.

"None of the revenues that are going to be derived from the Limetree Bay [agreement] is currently contained in the proposed Fiscal Year 2019 budget," Mr. Mapp said. "And as you may know, the Fiscal Year 2019 budget provides for \$131 million of new revenues as a result of the recovery and the projects that we are undertaking in the community. And so these revenues that we expect within the next year have to be quantified and added into our budgets that will be able to accommodate these changes in salary, but more importantly, allow us the opportunity to drive our recruitment campaign forward."

Feature Image: Natalie Nelson Tang How (Credit: VIC)