

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Void Of Top Leadership At VITEMA As Hurricane Season Approaches Highlighted At Senate Hearing

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Ernice Gilbert **March 13, 2019**



Denise Lewis, who served as the deputy director of planning and preparedness at the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) during the Mapp administration, and was appointed acting director when Mona Barnes resigned in December, has held the acting director position ever since, and remains in place 79 days before the 2019 hurricane season.

Ms. Lewis, who testified during a Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Safety on Tuesday, was well received by lawmakers as she appeared knowledgeable of the work. But, like with other acting directors who could be out of a job in a moment's notice, Ms. Lewis's efforts are hampered by the fact that Governor Albert Bryan could

name a replacement anytime -- and the governor has not spoken to Ms. Lewis about staying in place.

Asked by Senator Kurt Violet whether there was a void at VITEMA as the 2019 hurricane season approaches, Ms. Lewis was straightforward: "Yes," she responded. The agency has lost key staff over the last year and does not have an assistant director.



Acting VITEMA Director Denise E. H. Lewis

Mr. Violet was curious to see whether Mr. Bryan would change Ms. Lewis and bring in new leadership -- a team that would need to be familiarized with VITEMA -- so close to hurricane season. Mr. Bryan gave himself 90 days from January 7 to name his full cabinet.

"So we're a couple months before hurricane season and we don't have somebody who is permanently seated in that particular position, and there's a possibility that there can be somebody new, and that we'll be going through a number of changes or change of direction right before hurricane season is about to hit," the veteran St. Croix District lawmaker noted. "So I will wait and see how that plays out. I'm very curious to see exactly how it's going to play out and very curious to see whether or not you're going to remain in a leadership position since you seem to be quite knowledgeable."

Aside from a void of top brass, VITEMA is also struggling to keep its employees, many of whom, Ms. Lewis said, leave the local agency for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which pays better. In fact, at VITEMA's Public Assistance Unit -- the local agency's most important unit currently because it is responsible for overseeing worksheets, among other critical roles -- there were 14 vacancies as of Tuesday. Mr. Violet urged VITEMA to become competitive with salary and benefits to retain those individuals, noting that with the public assistance unit not fully staffed, projects in the territory could be delayed.

VITEMA is facing a myriad of problems aside from being understaffed. It had yet to identify shelters for the 2019 hurricane season, and the agency, which has food commodities to last five days in case of a storm, has to rely on Puerto Rico warehouses to deliver additional goods before an impending hurricane.



Senator Kurt Vialet (Democrat, St. Croix)

Ms. Lewis said the 911 system was in need of software and equipment for upgrades totaling \$1 million. And a Senator Novelle Francis-sponsored Act [that was supposed to see VITEMA collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars](#) from a cellphone surcharge tax, failed because the Public Services Commission is only able regulate income from landlines. Mr. Francis said he was in early talks to rectify the matter.

Ms. Lewis said tarps are being stored on St. Croix and St. Thomas but not St. John, because the agency's space on the island is limited. Senators also sought answers on a climate control room for the territory to house goods during disasters. The acting director said VITEMA for the past three to four years was in search of such a facility locally, but to date has not been successful. Asked by Senator Janelle Sarauw whether one could be built, Ms. Lewis said there were plans to incorporate a climate control room in a pending

facility on St. Croix, however funding would have to be discussed relative to a selfsame facility in St. Thomas.

The hurricane season will officially begin on June 1 and end on November 30.

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