

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senator DeGazon Presses For Change In NOPA Processing; Senator James Pushes For Data On Why Youth Are Leaving USVI

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The Committee on Education and Workforce Development met during Monday's legislative hearing where the Virgin Islands Department of Personnel (D.O.P.) gave updates pertaining to the department's current operations and the issues affecting the agency.

Dayna Clendinen, Personnel director nominee, said D.O.P. is uniquely positioned as it provides services to many departments and agencies in the V.I. government.

Her testimony covered status updates on all of the D.O.P. divisions. These include recruitment and classification; equal employment opportunity and policy development; training and employee development; fiscal and administrative services; HR information systems; record management, also known as the NOPA unit; donated leave program, and group health insurance.

When giving the status update on the NOPA unit, Ms. Clendinen told the legislative body that the department can receive up to 140 tickets per month. The NOPA unit strives to process impending NOPAS within five days, she said, but from January to March over 1,000 NOPAS have been in process in excess of fifteen days before reaching Personnel. The records management team continues to work to ensure expeditious handling of the NOPAS, Ms. Clendinen said.

Senator Allison Degazon asked, "Why does it take so long to get retirement NOPAs and also new employees NOPAs, and how do you plan to mitigate the problem?" She also inquired as to the length of time the information stays in the system before it is approved.

Ms. Clendinen explained that six or seven approvals are usually needed for the new NOPAS. However, she shared that she has seen NOPAS with a 24-hour turn-around time and that D.O.P. is in the process of trying to determine how to eliminate the bottlenecks that currently exist. Ms. Degazon then asked Ms. Clendinen if there was a specific standard on the division's end to expedite the process, and if it was possible to reduce the number of required approvals. "How do you plan to fix it?" asked Ms. Degazon. "We do have a standard operating procedure (SOP), and Mrs. Florine Audain-Hassell, assistant director D.O.P., has been assigned to eliminate waste," said Ms. Clendinen.

The problem with the retirees NOPAs, said Ms. Clendinen, is that they remain in the Department of Finance the longest. She said she would work closely with D.O.F. to facilitate an expeditious process. When asked by Ms. Degazon where that was on her list, Ms. Clendinen replied, "High on the agenda."

Ms. Degazon continued by asking what type of training will be provided to HR in each department to reduce NOPA delay. Ms. Clendinen said the D.O.P. has a plan and has hosted a "coffee and conversation" meeting to assess and develop a comprehensive plan to move forward.

"What is your benchmark?" asked Ms. Degazon. Ms. Clendinen said it would be decided at a scheduled June 12 meeting when the division aims to put specific timelines in place.

Ms. Degazon asked Ms. Clendinen what the biggest challenge she's encountered as director and how the Legislature could come alongside to help. "Facilitating the donated leave program," Ms. Clendinen responded. The donated leave issue stems from receiving employees' medical documents with a specific diagnosis and specific leave request. However, some employees often return with a request for additional time, sometimes more than once, Ms. Clendinen explained. "We often give up to a year, but some say they need more time and challenge us to take them to court."

When Senator Javan James took the floor, he mentioned that he read an article in the V.I. Consortium about millennials pulling their monies out of GERS and leaving the

territory. He asked Ms. Clendinen if she knew the reason they were leaving and what can be done about it. Ms. Clendinen explained that she needed time to assess the data and give an informed response regarding recruitment and retention and determine how to alleviate the problem. She added that D.O.P. receives the NOPA, but the reason for leaving is not specified. Mr. James suggested that D.O.P. review the need for exit interview forms and determine how to ensure that they are a requirement. This, Mr. James said, would give more insight as to why millennials are leaving. Ms. Clendinen vowed to meet with department heads to discuss implementing the measure.

Sexual harassment in the workplace was also discussed. Senator Stedman Hodge, Jr., Education and Workforce Development Committee chairman, noted that sexual harassment must be reported within five days. He mentioned that allegations were reported but not forwarded to the D.O.P. and it is essential that official training be given, not just to the leaders, but to the staff as well. Mr. Hodge shared that the Department of Labor plans to bring a trainer into the territory, and he encouraged D.O.P. to collaborate with the department.

Ms. Degazon was thorough in her probe of the continual NOPA processing delays and was assured by Ms. Clendinen that the D.O.P. would be diligent in moving forward to eliminate the bottleneck problem and put a streamlined process in place to expedite the NOPA process. Since Ms. Clendinen expressed that she personally witnessed a 24-hour NOPA turn-around time, "we expect nothing less than that from the D.O.P. and look forward to a follow-up when the process is implemented," Ms. DeGazon said.

Ms. Clendinen was flanked by her team during the hearing -- Mrs. Audain-Hassell, Valcina Quashie, deputy director; Cordell Rhymer Jr., network systems manager; Adonna Duggins, records management administrator; Millicent Aubain, territorial administrator of recruitment and classification; Dianne Bynoe-Davis, training coordinator; Kurell Hodge, policy and equal employment opportunity administrator; Maureen Venzen, chief of group health; Cosme Christian, Sr. HR technician -- who gave testimony specific to their assigned departments.

Ms. Clendinen expressed that the division's principle purpose as the chief human resources (H.R.) division is to function as the management and consulting arm for the executive branch of the V.I. Government, and as an essential element of the executive office of the governor. "H.R. is a critical function in an organization and plays a significant role in its success," she said.

Featured image: Sen. Javan James