

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I. Fire Service And E.M.S. To Merge October 1; \$7 Million In Budget Increase Request Could Not Be Justified

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For years the discussion of a merger between the Virgin Islands Fire Service (V.I.F.S.) and the Virgin Islands Emergency Medical Services (V.I.E.M.S.) has been abuzz, and on Thursday, officials of the Fire Service revealed that the merger would take effect October 1.

That's according to Daryl A. George, Sr., V.I.F.S. director, speaking during a budget hearing on Thursday. The Fire Service is seeking \$27 million for its 2020 budget, an increase of \$7.1 million from its 2019 request of \$19.9 million, though testifiers could not

justify the reason for the additional funds.

When [Governor Albert Bryan announced Mr. George](#) as director of V.I.F.S. in February, Mr. Bryan confirmed the merger when he said, "I look forward to him leading the Virgin Islands Fire Service in a collaborative working relationship with our commissioner of Health and the director of the Virgin Islands E.M.S. This collaboration will move the merger of Fire and EMS forward, and [will] improve our emergency response times and overall efficiency within our V.I.E.M.S. and V.I.F.S."

Part of the merger's goal is to cross-train firefighters as Emergency Medical Technicians, resulting in a more expedient and efficient emergency response team.

The [Consortium previously reported](#) in 2016 that an attempt at a merger was made but was thwarted when V.I.E.M.S. off-duty employees held a demonstration outside of the Charles Harwood Memorial Hospital protesting the manner in which the proposed merger was handled. They said the decision was made without their input and could undermine the quality of work they provide. Lack of staffing and equipment were also cited as concerns.

Mr. George testified that in order to allay staffing concerns, there will be an additional unit within V.I.F.S. to which emergency medical personnel will be assigned. "As part of the phased integration of the Fire Service and Emergency Medical Services, personnel from EMS will be transferred from the Department of Health to the Fire Service. There will be approximately 61 employees in this unit. The two agencies will work collaboratively to make the transition seamless for the employees and the public," he said.

When the topic of funding was introduced, Senator Kurt Violet inquired of the V.I.F.S. budget and noted the fiscal year 2019 budget was \$19.9 million, while the fiscal year 2020 budget had increased to \$27 million. Mr. George offered some insight into how the department says it intends to fund the merger, but he could not give specifics regarding the extra \$7.1 million.

Almost 97 percent of the general fund appropriation of the \$27 million for fiscal year 2020 will be used for personnel cost and for funding negotiated pay raises for current fire service personnel, Mr. George said.

V.I.F.S., however, when pressed further by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory about whether or not a plan was in place for the extra \$7 million, acknowledged that V.I.F.S. had no written plan. Ms. Frett-Gregory requested that V.I.F.S. produce one. "You have a habit of requesting funding and then planning afterwards, hence the increase," she said.