

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Give Police Commissioner Nominee Favorable Nod, But Not Before Grilling Him On Crime

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Ernice Gilbert **August 27, 2019**



With violent crime plaguing the territory -- there has been four homicide deaths in less than two weeks -- Senators on Monday piled their concerns on V.I.P.D. Commissioner Nominee Trevor Velinor, grilling the acting commissioner as they sought to learn of Mr. Velinor's crime prevention strategy, if any.

Senator Novelle Francis went straight to it, asking Mr. Velinor how he planned on combating the criminal element. "As late as just last night, we had yet another homicide," Mr. Francis reminded, referring to an incident where [a man was shot inside his home in the presence of his teenage son](#).

Days earlier, [four men were shot in Catherine's Rest](#), with one succumbing to his wounds. In St. Thomas, two people were shot to death last week: the first [in the neck on Wednesday night](#), and the second about the body [in broad daylight Saturday morning](#) near a church service.

"As we know, we have some major challenges in terms of manpower, but we're not going to let manpower deter us from what needs to be done. I plan to literally partner with our local and federal agencies. Literally we're talking about a 120-day initiative to begin with where we're going to be hitting the streets," Mr. Velinor said. He said individuals known to commit crime will be investigated, and that he intends to utilize both the V.I. Dept. of Justice and the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Mr. Velinor agreed with Senator Alicia Barnes on the assertion that the territory is in crisis relative to public safety. To that end, she asked Mr. Velinor for a "specific and definitive" action plan to address the stated crisis. Ms. Barnes said she did not notice a sense of urgency that would align with a crisis situation.

"In terms of an immediate plan, what I plan to do is, as I said earlier, bring (law enforcement) agencies to work with our police officers, [and] adjusting shifts to allow us to have more manpower at specific times of certain days. We've identified that a lot of our violent crimes occur at a certain time, certain days," he said.

Yet even as lawmakers pressed Mr. Velinor on crime-fighting plans, the V.I.P.D. remains woefully unprepared relative to resources to take on the crime challenge.

This was brought to the fore when Senator Janelle Sarauw, chair of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, asked Mr. Velinor what was the total sum of the V.I.P.D.'s 2020 budget. He revealed the amount to be \$60.2 million, 82 percent of which is for payroll. Ms. Sarauw asked Mr. Velinor how he planned on meeting the department's mandates with such a tight budget.

"We will try our best, but literally I see it as equivalent to fighting a major battle with almost both hands behind your back," he told the senator, a jarring assessment that nonetheless painted what Mr. Velinor believed was the true position of the police force.

He said with the current budget, only \$2.5 million was set aside for overtime work. "Officers are working a lot of hours and they don't want to work a lot of hours. However, we don't have enough officers to go straight time. And we anticipate that we are going to go beyond that," Mr. Velinor said. Asked about plans to reduce overtime without compromising service, the commissioner nominee said he planned on making shift adjustments.

"There are many officers who are working long hours followed up by an additional full 8-hr shift. So we're probably going to be forced literally to have 8, 10 and 12-hr shifts," he said. Mr. Velinor said assessments were being made so that the best route could be pursued. Relative to savings to the government of the Virgin Islands, a full assessment had not been made, Mr. Velinor said.

In his testimony, Mr. Velinor recognized violent crime as one of the territory's most daunting problems and vowed to work to reduce it.

"I submit to you that the greatest challenge in the United States Virgin Islands, and what has steered me to consider serving in the capacity of commissioner of police, is the issue of violent crime," he said.

He added, "To address the adverse impact of violent crime, particularly where firearms are used, requires a comprehensive and focused approach in pursuit of the worst of the worst offenders."

His nomination was favorably approved in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary and forwarded to the full body for final consideration before heading to Governor Albert Bryan's desk.