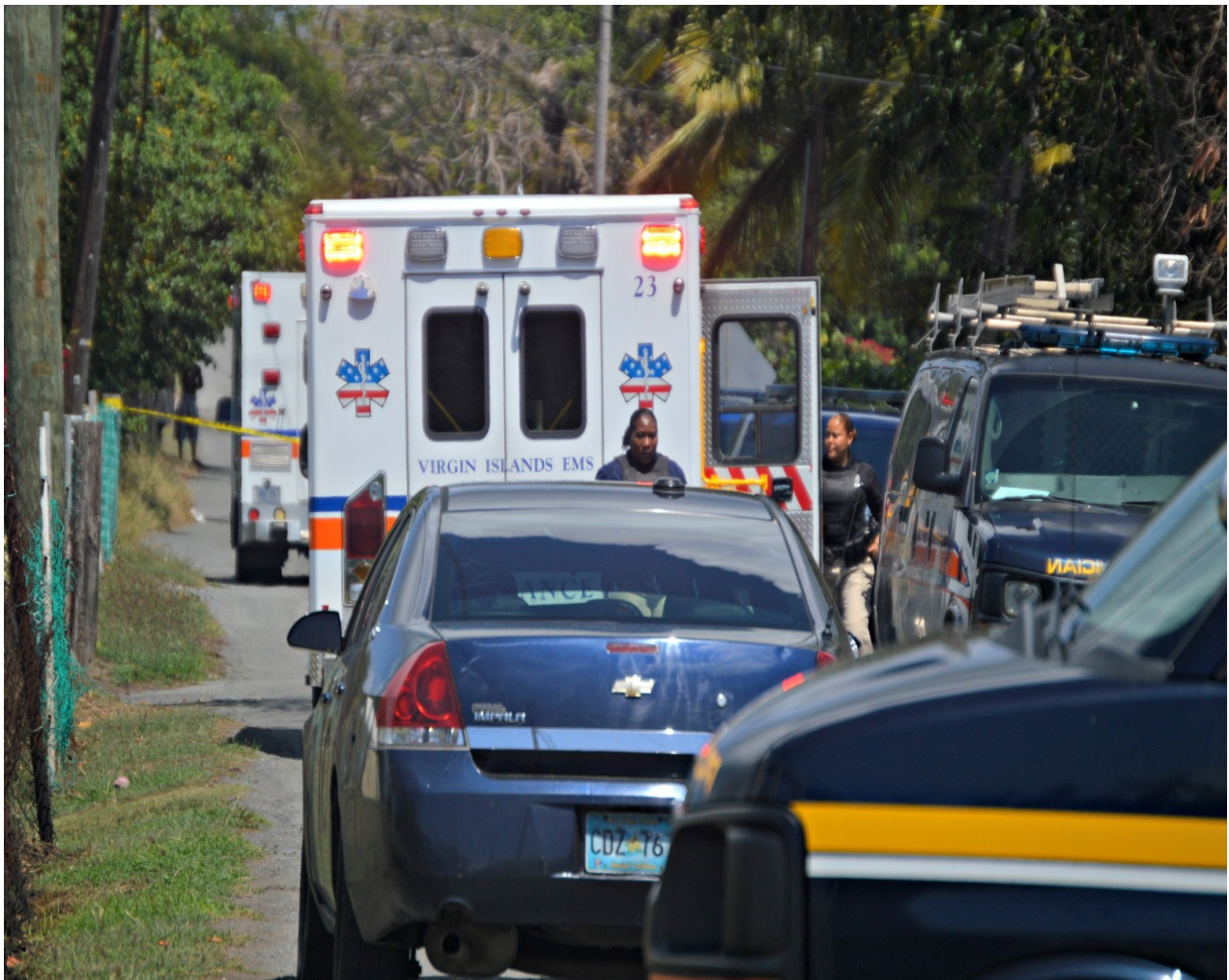


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Proposed VI Office of Gun Violence Prevention Passed its First Hurdle, But Questions Remain About Cost and Duplication of VIPD Work

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Robert Moore **October 24, 2019**



A bill that would create a new bureaucracy to collect data and issue regular reports on gun violence in the territory passed its first major hurdle Wednesday, receiving approval from the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, Public Safety, and Veterans Affairs.

Securing adequate funding for the office is another question.

The committee gave a favorable nod to Bill No. 33-0126, amending Title 3, Chapter 1 of the V.I. Code to establish the Virgin Islands Office of Gun Violence Prevention. The office would be under the auspices of the Office of the Governor. It provides for a \$700,000 appropriation from the fiscal year 2020 budget.

“The bill is offered for the countless lives lost to gun violence in the territory,” said sponsor Sen. Myron Jackson. “This is a comprehensive approach to address the root cause of gun violence.”

The measure lays out the overall duties, objectives, and employee responsibilities for the new department. The Office of Gun Violence Prevention will, among other things, “compile data on gun-related deaths and injuries reported by the Virgin Islands Police Department and the Department of Health and to release quarterly and annual reports.”

Citing the Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Report, a Senate press statement on the bill said there were 43 homicides in the Virgin Islands in 2018 and 31 as of October 2019. “In 2017, the Virgin Islands ranked high for violent deaths in the Caribbean. Those numbers placed our tiny islands at fourth in the world given stiff competition to countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, and Venezuela,” Mr. Jackson said.

Police Commissioner Trevor Velinor said he sees the potential for the office to unnecessarily duplicate existing crime prevention strategies and services of the VI Police Department, VIPD Victim Witness Advocates, and the VIPD Crime Prevention Unit. Mr. Velinor recommended conducting a three-year assessment with a “sunset provision” to monitor the impact of the office, if enacted by the full Legislature and signed into law by the governor.

Sen. Kenneth Gittens saw redundancies in the bill. He said that more parental involvement with youths could have a bigger impact on gun crimes. “Gun prevention starts with proper parenting. It takes a village to raise a child and until we go back to the basics, the world will change before our eyes.”

Similarly, Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory said multiple law enforcement agencies must collaborate to tackle gun violence in the territory.

The initial \$700,000 appropriation for the bill is not enough, Office of Management and Budget Director Jenifer O’Neal told Homeland Security committee members. She said the amount was insufficient for start-up salaries, equipment purchases, reporting costs, and public outreach.

The Office of Gun Violence Prevention measure goes to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

Separately, senators voted and approved the following: