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Dept. of Labor Understaffed, Employees Overworked and Tired: 'There's Only So Much We Can Do'

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Department of Labor on St. Croix By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

The situation at the Dept. of Labor, specifically at the St. Croix office, is dire. According to an employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity to the Consortium, fearing reprisal, the department is critically understaffed and employees have reached a breaking point.

According to this employee, the Unemployment Division, which is usually staffed with about 10 individuals, has dwindled to 5. "That division has an employee who passed out and was ordered home by a doctor because they had them working 6-7 days a week, 10 hours a day. Second employee, her mother died and up to this day — two months later — her mother hasn't been buried. Another employee who was pregnant and was supposed to give birth in November,

overworked and got her baby early."

The employee added, "It's only but so much you can do. We only have five people working the unemployment division, so if those five people stop to answer the phone, how can they put in these backed up claims? These hotlines that they are saying they have out there, it's a lie; there's nobody answering the phones. It's a lie. So people chewing the employees up, but they need to look at management."

In a post on the Consortium's Facebook platform Tuesday afternoon [asking residents](#) whether they have had issues calling the department and receiving no answer, over 200 comments were left. At least two individuals said their unemployment checks bounced.

This employee said the commissioner has instructed employees not to interact with the public. "If you interact with the public you could get written up. And when the people come to the door and you're trying to go in or come out, and the commissioner passes and sees you out there, he asks why are you out speaking to the public. We're not doing in-person, so we're not supposed to be interacting with no customers. But the people are not getting any answers from the phone and they need help," the employee said.

Labor Commissioner Gary Molloy was upset on Tuesday. He told the Consortium that he would curtail late working hours because someone had made a threat on the Consortium post that asked residents whether they were having issues trying to reach the department.

"There's nothing that we can do in moving it faster," he said, speaking of unemployment claims. The department has had immense trouble processing the federal unemployment funds for gig-workers and the self-employed. "It's going to bottleneck to my senior staff who are breaking down and I'm pushing them as it is, so at the end of the day... we'll make the adjustments and we can handle only the calls we can handle."

It remains a mystery as to why a department that is so important to the community has failed to hire a bevy of individuals to handle the massive workload. Mr. Molloy told the Consortium that the St. Croix office alone, between July and Sept. 18, received 232,000 calls. "There's no way we're going to be able to handle all those calls," he admitted. But when pressed on why the department hadn't hired more employees to process claims faster, the commissioner didn't provide much of an answer.

"I'm telling you, at the end of the day those calls — we have the additional support that we have — those calls, there's no way that anybody can answer all of those calls. We are in fact making calls as well. We have to, in fact, investigate cases. We have to make calls to followup with clients, and we have to make calls to just return calls. The staff is doing everything that they possibly can to the point where we were working late every night as well as weekends, to be able to do what we can to process. But at the end of the day, there's just more claims than we can process, and we are doing the best we can."

Mr. Molloy did say anyone the department hires would need expertise in VI unemployment laws and processes. "But even with that knowledge, they would still have to learn the specifics of each of the six unemployment programs that we are implementing right now at the same time, and getting ready to implement a 7th," he said.

The world, including the USVI, has been experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic for almost eight months, and the unemployment programs have been available [since April](#).

Mr. Molloy also stated that a separate unit has been setup to help claimants with challenges. "Some people are doing some things that they shouldn't be doing as well," he said.

Overworked and Underpaid

Aside from a severe staff shortage that has burdened the department, some employees owed wage increases since October have yet to be made whole, according to the employee who spoke to the Consortium on the condition of anonymity. "Right now there are employees waiting for salary increases from since October last year. They haven't gotten their money and they're still religiously going to work. People don't understand the pressure," this employee said.

Relative to government employees from various departments and agencies helping with claims, there were 10 individuals, six of whom botched the applications and the remaining four have since returned to their workplace, according to this employee.

Additionally, this employee said, masks are required to be changed twice a day, but employees are given three masks every three weeks.

"The employees try their best; it's not that they don't care for the community, but it's only so much we can do. People are overworked; we have yet to get a break," the employee said. "I feel the public's pressure, but the employees are under pressure also."

With the lack of additional employees to assist with the enormous workload on St. Croix, calls are being ignored. "It takes 45 minutes to handle a claim. If they stop to answer the phone, the time it takes to handle your case they could be putting in something else," this employee said.

The employee said though claimants were directed to handle claims online, the process is not as efficient as it should be. "The application supposed to come in to the Unemployment Unit for the supervisor to print it out and assign it. Sixty percent of the time it falls through, so if you don't know somebody in there that could followup on your stuff, you get lost," said the employee.

The department has had success in processing regular unemployment and the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation claims. D.O.L. had issued as of Monday 39,763 regular Unemployment Insurance checks for a total of \$30.5 million. It has issued 27,356 Federal Unemployment Compensation payments for a total of \$41.1 million. But it continues to struggle with the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program which is for gig workers and the self-employed (only \$4.1 million in payments has been issued), and Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (only \$1.3 million issued as of Monday).