

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Fireworks at Senate Hearing as Labor Commissioner Takes Offense Under Grilling From Senators

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Maxiene K. Cabo **December 02, 2020**



Labor Commissioner Gary Molloy participates virtually during a Senate hearing in the Committee on Education and Workforce Development Tuesday, Dec. 1, 2020.

During a Committee on Education and Workforce Development hearing Tuesday, lawmakers expressed their frustration and dissatisfaction with the VI Department of Labor (DOL) and how the department has handled the disbursement of unemployment insurance to residents in the territory.

Labor Commissioner Gary Molloy came before senators to give an update on the status of the ongoing unemployment programs in the territory. According to Mr. Molloy, as of

November 29, 2020, DOL had received 17,259 applications (4005 paper and 13,254 on-line), and the department had processed a total of 16,307 of those applications. He also noted that the department had paid out over \$93 million (82,550 checks) in unemployment compensation since April 7, 2020.

Yet while his testimony to the committee highlighted the several advancements the department has made since the pandemic, senators expressed their discontent with DOL regarding the number of residents who had yet receive an unemployment check.

Sen. Kurt Vialet told Mr. Molloy that himself along with his colleagues have received countless phone calls in reference to unemployment checks and payments. To that end, the senator sought responses relative to the underlying issue at the department hampering the issuance of payments.

"It's the nature of the unemployment system," said Mr. Molloy in response, adding that DOL is in a real "catch 22", where all individuals want to know is when they will be receiving a check, without taking into consideration some of the challenges that may arise, "not based necessarily on our processing, but based on the information that they filled in on the application or some of their specific circumstances."

Mr. Vialet further inquired as to why some individuals would receive two checks, and then the checks would stop. Mr. Molloy clarified to the senators that a check could be stopped for a number of reasons, however, the most frequent reason the department has been seeing is that some claimants have not been completing the two-week recertification and putting it back in the dropbox. "With unemployment, that check stub is the key to continuing the process of the next check," he said.

Committee Chair Donna Frett-Gregory told Mr. Molloy that one of the constant complaints lawmakers receive besides individuals not receiving their checks, is that they are calling the Labor office to no avail. Mr. Molloy's explanation to Ms. Frett-Gregory was that the department receives "an awful amount of calls."

While Ms. Frett-Gregory said she understood the challenges DOL faces, she told Mr. Molloy, "We also have to lean in on the challenges and the concerns of the individuals who are suffering in our community, who have challenges with paying their WAPA bills, their rent, etc."

"We're hearing all kinds of excuses, but you can't hear a succinct plan as to how we're going to get people back on the payroll," said Mr. Vialet

Ms. Frett-Gregory told Mr. Molloy that a system needs to be in place. "Just think about the person on the other end of that telephone who is not receiving the service, or who believes they are being ignored," she said.

During Sen. Janelle Sarauw's round of questioning, she asked Mr. Molloy for an explanation as to why DOL checks [bounced in October](#). Mr. Molloy informed Ms. Sarauw that the department was doing daily check runs and that based on the check run, the department had to make sure the appropriate drawdowns were done and that the drawdowns reached the bank.

"By us doing daily check runs, some draws were done after 3:00 pm, which then was not credited in the bank the next day," he said, revealing that 62 checks had bounced as a result of the mishap. He assured senators that there is a mechanism in place to prevent this situation from happening in the future.

As the hearing progressed, things in the chamber began to get heated after Mr. Molloy couldn't provide the data on how many people in the community were taking advantage of the department's Apprenticeship Program. When Mr. Violet questioned Mr. Molloy on the status of workforce development and being able to train individuals in different trade areas, Mr. Molloy transparently said, "The progress of that is that we are in a pandemic, and so within a pandemic, several of the programs had to be suspended."

Frustrated with Mr. Molloy's response, Mr. Violet said, "If that is going to be the excuse for everything, while we're in the pandemic, we have to import individuals to work in the Virgin Islands. So we are not doing what is necessary to build capacity on this island.

Mr. Violet added, "We have to continuously import tradesmen to do work on this island... the entity that is in charge of workforce development prior to the pandemic did not do what they're supposed to do and now during the pandemic when we even need it more still isn't doing what they need to do."

Ms. Frett- Gregory added, "This particular administration continues to talk about workforce development, but we still find ourselves not moving forward because we are appearing like we can't walk and chew gum at the same time."

"The pandemic don't stop everything from happening. This government has to realize that work continues; we can't keep suspending this suspending that," said Mr. Violet.

As Mr. Violet continued, he drew attention to Mr. Molloy's comment stating that due to Governor Bryan's executive order to have a "soft-close" for government agencies, the department will not be seeing individuals in person for the next two-weeks.

"We have a soft close, so you suspend individuals from coming to the office, you had a protocol in place to make sure there was social distancing, but we suspend services to people four weeks before Christmas that might have been help to go back on the payroll," Mr. Violet said.

Ms. Frett- Gregory agreed with Mr. Violet, stating, "We can't continue to make excuses." She expressed that in her opinion, for the last ten months, all of the government agencies have been in some form of a "soft close" protocol. Ms. Frett-Gregory wanted to know what does the "soft close" mean for DOL and how it will impact those individuals who are applying and can't get responses.

Mr. Molloy got noticeably offended when he felt the senators didn't appreciate the hard work he and his staff at the department do on a daily, contending, "I am extremely disappointed. One of the things that is very clear here today is that there is no respect for what the Department of Labor has done and continuing to do."

Ms. Frett- Gregory told Mr. Molloy that it is disrespectful to say to elected leaders of the Legislature that they do not respect the employees of the Department of Labor and the work they have done. "That is the farthest thing from the truth," asserted Ms. Frett-

Gregory. "We are not going to play on emotions today."

Ms. Frett- Gregory said all she and her colleagues were asking for is to get the information around the situation at DOL that is impacting the people of the Virgin Islands.

"People are hurting in this territory, and we recognize it," she said.

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