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Only Ten of Territory's Forty-Nine 2020 Homicides Closed; Police Commissioner Confident Number Will Increase in 2021

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Crime scene on St. Croix. By. VI CONSORTIUM

In 2020 the territory had 49 homicides but the V.I.P.D has only closed 10 of those cases, yielding 15 associated arrests, revealed Virgin Islands Police Commissioner Trevor Velinor. This equates to 20.4 percent of the homicides being closed. Senators and the V.I.P.D discussed possible ways to improve this number and solving crimes in the future during a Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety hearing Wednesday.

During testimony, Mr. Velinor stated that homicides rose in the territory by 14 percent from 2019 to 2020. There were 49 homicides in 2020 compared to 43 homicides in 2019. The most affected

demographic was the age group of 18-29, which accounted for approximately 63 percent of the homicides in the territory in 2020, said the police commissioner.

Senator Novelle Francis, a former law enforcement officer and police commissioner, had asked how many homicide cases were cleared with the 22 homicide arrests mentioned in Mr. Velinor's testimony, which led to the aforementioned statistic from the commissioner.

Freshman Independent Senator Franklin Johnson asked bluntly, "What is the department doing? You're arresting people, you're charging people but still we are not closing the doors on them?"

The question gave the commissioner an opportunity to explain the process of getting a conviction in these cases. "It does take time for the case to be perfected, to have sufficiency; to have enough to prosecute those cases. It's not unusual for cases to take longer to have as much evidence as possible to be able to have it strong enough to present to the AG (attorney general's) office."

Mr. Velinor was optimistic that the V.I.P.D will be able to perfect some of the cases in 2020, and he expects the number of closed cases to grow with time. There are some cases that have proved more difficult to solve because the V.I.P.D. has not been able to collect all the requisite scientific evidence.

Mr. Johnson asked whether there were plans to establish a crime lab in the territory, and if said lab would speed up the process of securing the scientific evidence needed to close some of the open cases. Mr. Velinor assured lawmakers that the Department of Justice and the A.G. were working on opening a crime lab in the Virgin Islands.

Asked by Mr. Johnson whether the current process of sending scientific evidence away slows down the process of closing cases, Mr. Velinor said, "Absolutely. It does take time to get evidence back when we send it off."

The V.I. Dept. of Justice under former Attorney General Claude Walker announced in January 2017 that the D.O.J. [had begun work on establishing a forensic lab](#) in the USVI, specifically on St. Thomas.

At the time, Mr. Walker stated, "For too long the Virgin Islands has had to send forensic evidence off island and this practice has been very costly financially. In addition, too often, we have to wait a very long time to receive the results, causing significant delays in the administration of justice. We have had cases where defendants had to wait for a lengthy period to clear their names and this undue delay affects victims as well... So, this facility will be of great help to us in some areas of the forensic science by allowing us to process certain important evidence in a timelier manner... So, at the Department of Justice, we continue to make giant leaps forward."

Asked by Freshman Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger about the number of cold cases in the territory, the commissioner didn't have the exact number but said it was "beyond a few dozen."

The matter is personal Ms. Francis-Heyliger, who lost a brother through gun violence and the case has since gone cold. "I know there are a lot of people in this territory who have lost family members and not really gotten information, and it has gone in to cold-case status. We would really like to know what's happening so there could be some closure."

Mr. Francis asked about the installation of cameras which he believes would play a critical role in the department's crime-fighting efforts. The police department expects 104 cameras to be installed by July of this year.

Senator Samuel Carrion questioned the commissioner on the newly established Office of Gun Violence and how the V.I.P.D would work alongside it. Mr. Carrion said Mr. Velinor had reservations about the new office when it was presented before the Senate previously.

“We fully support this office,” the police commissioner said. “This particular unit, the ability to tap into our community, to bridge the gap and have conversations, to bridge the gap multiple ways, possibly the community police gap, the feud gap that exists between members of our community, I think that is big.”

Another area of concern for senators was the increase in domestic violence calls but decrease in domestic violence arrests. The testimony stated that there were 799 calls about domestic violence and only 177 domestic violence arrests in 2020, compared to 643 domestic violence calls and 198 arrests in 2019.

Mr. Carrion asked the commissioner directly about the matter, to which Mr. Velinor responded, “The only cases we can arrest on are those that, if we respond to a situation and there’s evidence of domestic violence, we arrest the individual. A lot of the times in those cases they are domestic calls. Some of the domestic calls are not a violent situation but an argument.”

Chairperson of the committee, Sen. Steven Payne, asked the commissioner if the increase in calls was due to the pandemic, as more people are working from home. The police commissioner said it could be a contributing factor.