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There are No Spanish-Speaking 911 Operators in Territory; Senators Temporarily Blocked VITEMA Official From Testifying for Lying

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Kyle Murphy **February 18, 2021**

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It was revealed during the second block of the Committee of Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety hearing Wednesday that there are currently no Spanish speaking 9-1-1 operators at the territory's 9-1-1 Emergency Call Centers, a revelation that infuriated senators as they contended it presents a huge problem for the Spanish-speaking community.

Senator Franklin Johnson noted that according to the testimony of Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency Director, Daryl Jaschen, it is not a requirement to be bilingual to become a 9-1-1 operator. Mr. Johnson then asked whether there was anyone that is currently part of the 9-1-1 dispatcher unit that is bilingual, to which Mr. Jaschen said there were none. (It was later revealed that an individual who speaks both English and broken French, sometimes called

Creole or Patois, is employed at 9-1-1.)

Mr. Johnson then asked, "Don't you think this is something that we should have with the amount of Hispanic people in our community?" Mr. Jaschen responded, "I agree with you completely, senator. We need to get bilingual 9-1-1 individuals in 9-1-1."

While Mr. Jaschen stated in his testimony that there are special outreach programs to attract bilingual speakers, this answer was not satisfactory to the legislative body.

Chairperson of the committee, Sen. Steven Payne, asked about the process if a solely Spanish speaking person were to call 9-1-1. Deputy VITEMA Director Bruce Kelly responded that there was a third-party software translation service that would be utilized to handle the translation. However, Mr. Johnson, during a point of information asked Mr. Kelly why then, didn't the 9-1-1 employees know about this software.

Mr. Kelly had to back-track his comments. "I stand corrected. We are currently looking at several companies that offer translation services, not software but translation services to be utilized as a stop-gap measure while we are actively trying to recruit that bilingual population of the community to be represented," he later stated.

The fact that VITEMA was looking into software instead of having one already in place, only added fuel to the fire.

Mr. Payne stated, "Like I tell everyone that comes before this body, it doesn't benefit any of us to lie to this body. You have a responsibility and the people that are watching."

Mr. Payne added that there is nothing wrong with saying that no system in place. However, "There is a problem with lying to the people of the Virgin Islands because when you give us information, you know what we do, we pass it on." He also barred Mr. Kelly from testifying further.

Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger also aired her displeasure with Mr. Kelly. "I felt like someone just kicked me in my chest just now. The only thing we ask of the different agencies and departments that come here, is tell us facts so we can take those facts and change laws, implement policies to help the people of this territory."

She passionately added, "I came here to protect this territory and you do not have the right or the authority to come to this branch of government and lie to any of the 15 senators here. When you lie to me, you lie to 100,000 people."

After a 10-minute recess, senators decided to allow Mr. Kelly to continue testifying.

Senator Kenenth Gittens was the first senator to question VITEMA after the recess and agreed with the decision to allow Mr. Kelly to continue. "The gentleman apologized and corrected his statement," Mr. Gittens said.

Senator Dwayne Degraff added a similar sentiment during his time. "We could sit here and stay upset versus getting down to the business of the people," he said.

Mr. Jaschen said that VITEMA definitely wants to bring on additional 9-1-1 staff and doubled down on his earlier comments about outreach programs for 9-1-1 operators.

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