

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mass Exodus of VITEMA Employees Raises Alarms; Senators Grill Agency Director for Answers

Government / **Published On March 09, 2021 04:16 AM /**

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When V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency Director, Daryl Jaschen appeared before the Senate on Monday for a Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure hearing, the conversation shifted from getting tsunami sirens installed across the territory to what appears to be an employee retention crisis at the agency.

Senator Janelle Sarauw was the first lawmaker to express her concern with the exodus of qualified personnel from VITEMA. "We cannot continue to have the leadership issues that we have at VITEMA and the mass exodus of qualified personnel not because they want to leave but because the environment has become toxic. That is the reason we have issues at VITEMA. VITEMA is in crisis," she said. Ms. Sarauw had spent minutes

attempting to get an update from Mr. Jaschen on the status of an employee, the records and property management specialist, whom it was revealed after much prodding was forced out.

"The individual in that position was forced to resign. Forced. They didn't leave for upward mobility; that's where they wanted to be but they were forced to resign. I have the documentation. And I am saying that in a critical agency — a lot of times were focus on GERS and WAPA, and those are critical as well — but VITEMA is critical to the territory. Mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery, and we cannot continue to have the leadership issues that we have at VITEMA..."

Ms. Sarauw said later in the hearing that under Mr. Jaschen's leadership, twenty-two employees have left in the past year and the agency's information technology employee was terminated last week. That's 21.3 percent of the agency's workforce being either forced to resign or terminated.

Senator Steven Payne asked about the resignation process and the role that the VITEMA director has in it. "Madam chair asked you if an employee had resigned or been terminated and you didn't have an answer to her inquiry. My question to you is does resignation and terminations of employees of VITEMA come through your office for you to sign off on?" Mr. Jaschen responded, "Yes, I'm the one that signs the resignation and the governor approves."

Mr. Payne then said, "I'm hearing you but when Madam chair inquired about a certain employee you couldn't answer if the person resigned or [had] been terminated."

Senator Marvin Blyden wanted to know more about the review process of former employees' separation with VITEMA. "When you sign off on documents do you usually go through the file to see exactly what's going on, what took place to prevent it from occurring again to come up with training and plans moving forward?"

Mr. Jaschen said that termination and resignation is the last resort and "when the letter comes, a lot of times I review that, I have discussions with the assistant director, I have discussions with the deputy director but ultimately the decision is mine."

Mr. Blyden was dissatisfied with this answer and followed up by stating, "I asked you directly, when it comes to resignation, termination or any type of separations, you said you sign off. I asked you, do you go through the file to ascertain exactly what occurred and based on that, what type of training is necessary for that division and what type of plan you need to put forth in order to prevent certain things from occurring in the future."

Mr. Jaschen said, "I have my deputy director and my assistant director with roles and responsibilities for that. When it comes up to me the letter is set up I review that, I have a conversation, I sign it and go forward to the governor for his signature and approval."

Mr. Blyden further drilled down on Mr. Jaschen on his original question. "You have a high rate of turnover in a short timespan, have there been any plan or training come forth as a result of that?" Mr. Jaschen said, "There is a discussion about what we can do to get more qualified individuals. So the answer is yes."

Still not pleased, Mr. Blyden pressed, "You said the plan is to get more qualified individuals, I'm talking about a plan to address the issue about what is going on in that space, when it comes to individuals not continuing their employment with the agency," he said. "Director Jaschen I understand that you're not willing to answer those questions here on the record so I will meet with you off the record and see what type of recommendation and or suggestion I can assist the agency with because it is an important agency."

Senator Kurt Violet used a point of information to say, "We are asking Director Jaschen the hard questions but the reality is that before certain individuals were employed at VITEMA, Director Jaschen did not have an exodus of employees. The employees were there, then the addition of literally one person has led to a number of individuals moving from VITEMA or being terminated despite being qualified for the position. We can't move the Virgin Islands forward if we are going to be terminating individuals that qualify for the position they hold."

The Consortium has learned that Barbara Petersen, assistant VITEMA director, is the singular person Mr. Violet was referring to. The publication has also learned that some VITEMA employees are being terminated without the approval of Mr. Jaschen. The chief financial officer, for example, was terminated and Mr. Jaschen did not even know, according to a person with knowledge of the matter. The terminated CFO received the termination letter at the same time Mr. Jaschen did, this person said.

"He never recommended that she be terminated," said the person, who requested anonymity to speak freely on the internal dealings of the agency.

Mr. Jaschen eventually said, "I'm not going to entertain anymore on this.. this is my organization to run. I appreciate the information and questions but the process that I have is internal," after Ms. Sarauw asked him, "Who made the recommendations for most of the terminations that came across your desk."