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With 60 Percent of Firefighters Eligible for Retirement, VI Fire Service Touts Preparation to Fill Void

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Firefighters contain blaze at Strawberry Home on St. Croix on April 14, 2020. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR THE VIRGIN ISLANDS CONSORTIUM

The Virgin Islands Fire Service is actively recruiting, training and hiring new firefighters as over 60 percent of the department's staff has served for more than 20 years and are eligible for retirement, said Daryl George, director of V.I.F.S. during a Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety hearing Tuesday.

He said most of the department's senior staff are eligible to retire, "that's why we strategically started to plan with those hirings to make sure we could mitigate any influx of individuals leaving."

Both districts have a succession plan in place should senior employees retire, said Mr. George.

He believes the department has a good handle on the situation, crediting his management staff for their effort in organizing a plan. “I think we have a good relationship with our employees and they see that the work we are trying to do to enhance the department. We want them to be a part so they are not really leaving in droves. I am very pleased on that end but at the end of the day they are going to leave some day, so we have to be prepared for that influx of individuals that may want to [leave] in the next couple of years.”

During Mr. George’s testimony, he said that in 2020, twenty new Firefighters were trained and assigned to shifts in the St. Thomas/St. John District, while seventeen firefighters have been hired, trained, and assigned to shifts in the St. Croix District.

And V.I.F.S. isn't done with its recruitment drive. “The agency will continue to implement its hiring plan and anticipates hiring eight new firefighters in the St. Croix District and twenty new firefighters in the St. Thomas-St. John District within this calendar year,” the director said.

Mr. George said that the department received funding through the [SAFER Grant](#) that allowed V.I.F.S. to recruit new individuals. The Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grants (SAFER) was created to provide funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter interest organizations to help them increase or maintain the number of trained, "front line" firefighters available in their communities, according to a description on FEMA's website.

Asked by Senator Carla Joseph whether he was able to utilize the Junior Firefighters program, part of whose aim is to help build an early pool of potential employees. Mr. George called the program his “baby,” stating that twenty-seven current firefighters — including himself — went through the Junior Firefighter program. Additionally, four of the recent graduates were also part of the program, the director said.