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At Human Services, Staff Shortage is Straining Employees, Causing Burnout

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Dept. of Human Services officials told lawmakers Wednesday that some of the department's job vacancies were removed from the D.H.S. budget, a situation that is causing problems for the department. The staff shortage issue was brought to the fore on the heels of [a brutal crime against a minor](#) that saw the boy's stepfather hanging, beating and secluding him in a house. The child had to be airlifted for treatment. D.H.S. has a caseworker shortage as well.

Asked by Senator Samuel Carrion, chairman of the Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation what actions D.H.S. had taken to fill the vacancies, D.H.S. Commissioner Kimberly Causey-Gomez said the department has requested that critical-hire vacancies be funded, with D.H.S. creating a supplemental budget to fill the positions - though the budget needs funding.

“Basically what is happening is the G.V.I. during the budget crunch in 2020, a lot of vacancies were taken from the actual vacancy list, so when it came to 2021 those positions were not even available. So now we are trying to get a supplemental budget to put those positions back into the budget to ensure that we are staffed up,” Ms. Causey-Gomez said.

The staff shortage not only affects the local operations of D.H.S. but also the department's federal match requirements, according to the commissioner. She explained that when there is a shortage of employees to administer programs such as Medicaid and SNAP, there is the possibility of federal dollars allocated to the territory being returned.

Giving an example, Ms. Causey-Gomez pointed to programs where the federal government matches the salaries of certain employees. If the local government does not provide its match, this threatens the funding of affected programs and the future implementation thereof.

Senator Carla Joseph asked whether D.H.S. had a correction plan in place aimed at saving the federal programs at risk of being discontinued locally. Ms. Causey-Gomez said D.H.S. holds meetings with federal partners to ascertain that the department is in compliance. “We are very in tune with all our federal partners to ensure the V.I. don’t send money back and hopefully we don't have to do that,” she said. “I don’t like to send money back especially when it's for our territory, especially for services, especially when it's for hiring, especially when it's during this time frame of a pandemic when people are out of work. I can't list vacancies, I can’t recruit unless I actually have the position to recruit.”

Senator Javan James sought to learn why there was just one social worker for the St. Croix district.

“I am a little concerned, I don't get into that St. Croix vs. St. Thomas thing but obviously there is a disparity when it comes to the amount of social workers in the St. Thomas district compared to the St. Croix district,” he said.

Mr. James pointed to the importance of the caseworker position, including the position's role of monitoring school attendance of students in D.H.S. programs. “No way one person in the St. Croix district can be able to assist all these children and monitor their attendance. It's impossible,” he said.

In addition to potentially losing funding, the staff shortage is also causing strain on current employees. “This lack of staff is rendering incredible efforts by very dedicated and professional staff to have limited effectiveness,” Ms. Causey-Gomez stated. “Management staff are carrying caseloads and filling essential roles that are vacant. This need for management staff to be immersed in case-carrying activities is preventing much-needed management, administrative oversight, policy and procedural activities and updates that directly affect service provision and federal compliance.”

Asked by Ms. Joseph whether some employees were experiencing burnout because of the staff shortage, Ms. Causey-Gomez responded in the affirmative and said the University of the Virgin Islands will be conducting a burnout survey at D.H.S. to determine the extent of the problem. The survey will also be conducted at other government departments and agencies.

