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50 Vacancies at Waste Management Authority Leads to No Citations or Enforcement

Government / **Published On April 30, 2021 04:31 AM /**

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Illegal waste dumping By. GETTY IMAGES

While the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority website lists five available positions under its career opportunities tab, it was revealed at a Committee of Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure hearing Thursday that there were 50 job openings within W.M.A., a problem lawmakers expressed was of great concern.

This information was revealed during Senator Samuel Carrion's line of questioning. He was so puzzled by the number that he needed clarification on whether it was indeed 50 or 15.

Asked if job listings were posted anywhere, Sadie Clendinen, W.M.A. chief administrative officer, said 39 of the jobs were posted between W.M.A's website and the Department of Labor's

V.I.E.W.S. system.

The W.M.A. [website](#) lists the following job openings: chief engineer, chief legal officer, chief financial officer, environmental health and safety officer, and staff engineer available on both St. Thomas and St. Croix with an application deadline of May 28th.

Roger Merritt, WMA executive director, was asked by Mr. Carrion to explain the high level of vacancies, to which he responded, "I don't know if there is a specific reason."

Mr. Carrion drilled down on the issue by asking how many employees were currently at W.M.A., and Mr. Merritt said 120. The senator pounced, "One hundred and twenty, and you have 50 positions that are vacant. I see a big problem here in reference to being productive and carrying out your mandates and responsibilities in the territory when you have 50 positions that are empty."

Asked by Mr. Carrion what the issues were relative to hiring for these positions, Ms. Clendinen said W.M.A. has had to discard "quite a few" applications for legal reasons, and added that pay is also a factor. She said the authority has been trying to raise the salary of some of the frontline workers to help with recruitment.

The legal reasons comment was later explained by Ms. Clendinen, who said some applicants don't have a high school diploma, and that their drug test or background check results are not favorable.

Senator Carla Joseph asked whether the authority could come up with a solution that would allow individuals without a high school diploma to be hired with a time-sensitive clause of diploma completion. Ms. Clendinen said W.M.A. tried that before and individuals did not follow through on their promise, and the authority was advised by legal counsel to discontinue the practice.

Mr. Carrion was baffled as to how W.M.A. got to fifty vacancies with only three retirements and sought answers on the possible factors that caused them to leave. Ms. Clendinen said since the start of the fiscal year there have been eight separations, and in exit interviews the authority learned "many of them move on for other potential job opportunities."

Chairwoman of the Committee, Senator Janelle Sarauw, inquired about the high number of vacancies but the limited amount of job listings. In response, Ms. Clendinen said some of the job listings have multiple openings and that W.M.A. has been staggering listing the openings because, "We do have to anticipate the influx of applications. If we do them all at one time we will not be able to manage them with the staff that we have."

Ms. Sarauw did not understand the staggering of the listings as they have been vacant for a while and the matter directly relates to the ability of W.M.A. carrying out its duties. "I don't understand the story that you only post five positions but there's really eight of one, and we are staggering them because of the influx. You've had 50 vacancies since Noah's Ark was built so I don't understand the staggering of the vacancies as why you can't hire people," Ms. Sarauw said. "We are on this because this does affect your disaster recovery funds. This does affect how you proceed with completing projects that fall under disaster recovery."

Ms. Clendinen added that the authority has made some progress as fourteen new employees were hired this fiscal year.

Senator Kurt Viallet sought clarity on why high-level positions were listed on the website but not frontline positions. "The bread and butter positions, those that are going out on the streets and

doing the work, etc. are not listed," he said. "We continue to not have the positions listed that are necessary for us to be able to do everything possible to obtain as much of the disaster recovery funds, or the Infrastructure Act funds as much as possible because we don't have sufficient staff in this entity." The senator pleaded with Mr. Merritt: "If you have those positions put it out, let them turn in the applications."

A position that W.M.A has been seeking to fill but has not posted is the need for enforcement officers, according to Mr. Merritt. He said W.M.A. enforcement officers have been working with the territory's Covid-19 Task Force under the V.I. Police Department, and that new openings for the position along with a manager for the enforcement officers would soon be posted. Senator Franklin Johnson suggested that Mr. Merritt reach out to the head of the task force about returning the W.M.A. enforcement officers, which Mr. Merritt said he would do.

The lack of W.M.A. enforcement officers has led to a lax in citations for illegal dumping, Mr. Merritt said. The executive director saw the fix to this matter being the hiring of more enforcement officers and installation of cameras at bin sites.

Senator Novelle Francis said installation of cameras without enforcement officers would not be enough. "Just having cameras alone without strong enforcement is counter-effective," he said. "We have to be able to build our security force, or enforcement, so that we can be able to make apprehensions and set an example. I am hoping that with the installation of these cameras at these bin sites that in fact they can be supported by the enforcement."