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Bill Seeks Removal of Police Commissioner Upon Expiration of Contract; Velinor Responds: Violent Crime in VI Has Held Steady for Decades

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Police Commissioner Trevor Velinor.

On the agenda of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety Monday was a measure that expresses no confidence in the ability of Trevor Velinor, the territory's police commissioner to lead the V.I. Police Department. The measure calls on Governor Albert Bryan not to renew the commissioner's contract and to appoint "a qualified person to serve as commissioner of the (V.I.P.D.) who has demonstrated the leadership ability, skills, and commitment to reduce crime and violence significantly in the Virgin Islands, especially gun violence and homicides."

The legislation, [Bill No. 34-0056](#), was sponsored by Senator Steven D. Payne, and while it was removed from Monday's lineup because it was not in the committee of jurisdiction (it must first go through Rules and Judiciary), it is scheduled to be heard "at a future hearing."

The bill pulls no punches. It assails Mr. Velinor for failing to curtail crime even in known hot spots. It says Mr. Velinor has "principally been reactive rather than proactive by belatedly deploying his police force and setting up remote police stations, police foot patrols and vehicle patrols in affected areas only after violent incidents, including multiple gun violence murders, have occurred." The bill also highlights what was described as the territory's "dubious international reputation as the fourth highest area for homicides in the world per capita."

The bill then points to 108 homicides that have occurred in the territory under Mr. Velinor's tenure, and adds, "most of the homicides in 2019 and 2020 in the Virgin Islands have remained unsolved by the Police Department."

In an interview with the Consortium Tuesday, Mr. Velinor defended his leadership and vowed to continue working with the resources at his disposal. "My role here is to do a job, and the job that I really highlight is my purpose for coming here which is to lead a police department. And sometimes when you're leading you're going to take positions that are not popular. As such I will continue to perform my duties at the best of my capability with the resources that I have," he said.

The commissioner also rejected the argument from Mr. Payne that the homicides occurring in the USVI are due to a lack of leadership. "I looked at the stats for the last 20 years," he said. So from 2000 to present, and I've seen the crime trend where we've averaged well over 40 homicides per year every single year for the most part. We've been as high as 61 homicides and we've seen some in the low 30s. But ultimately my responsibility is to try to find ways that I can get resources that we need to do the job; I can influence individuals to be a part of policing, and for us to coordinate with our community to address issues before they become homicides, and also when they are in fact homicides, that we're able to work those cases and to find justice for the victims."

Asked whether he's been successful in the areas mentioned, the commissioner said, "I wouldn't be the person to articulate success; I think success comes from our community. What success looks like is something that we all are a part of. I'd love to see less homicides in our territory, but as I've said, it's not simply a policing issue, it's an issue that police plays a significant part of solving and deterring crime, but so too does is the greater community."

Mr. Velinor said he's gotten positive feedback from the governor. "I often say that my reputation precedes me prior to even coming home to the Virgin Islands. I think I have demonstrated credibility, my integrity is very high, and I continue to demonstrate competency. So those are the things that I came here with and I'm going to leave here at whatever time with."

Mr. Velinor has over 30 years of law enforcement experience, with the vast majority of those years as an ATF agent. "I think the governor appreciates the fact that I'm here and that I've done the best job that I can do with the resources we have, in terms of trying to really facilitate a police department that we know is under a consent decree and yet we've continued to make strides towards full compliance."

He added, "Before me there were many homicides and with any commissioner that sits in the seat there are going to be homicides. Now, how we address those homicides is so important to give people a sense of safety and a sense of understanding that they can also be empowered to be a part of the solution."

Not all senators support the bill. Senator Kurt Vialet, for example, told the Consortium he would not vote to approve the measure, stating it does nothing to improve the territory's crime problem. "A no-confidence bill doesn't do anything. It just says no confidence but it doesn't change what is going to happen tomorrow. We need to look at our investigative arm and redeployment of officers — those types of areas are what concerns me, not a vote of no confidence. That's neither here nor there," Mr. Vialet said.

Mr. Vialet also spoke about the possibility of bringing in outside investigative help for a short period of time to help with caseload, forensics, "and just trying to break open some of these cases where we do have evidence," he said. "We have pictures, videos, etc — to connect the dots. I want us to deal with the redeployment of offices, exactly how they're scheduled. I'd like for the focus to be on those time periods when crime is increasing to redeploy officers. There's no need for the bulk of officers to be working from 8-5. They need to be working when crime is taking place."

The senator also spoke of full implementation of the police force's GPS system "so they could know where officers are every single minute of the day, so that when something happens you could know that there's a unit to respond."

"But a vote of no confidence doesn't change anything the next day, so I wouldn't be supporting it," Mr. Vialet reiterated.

According to Gov't House, Mr. Velinor's appointment is part of an agreement between the ATF and the Government of the Virgin Islands under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) Mobility Program, which provides for temporary assignment of personnel between the federal and state and local governments.