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Corrections Officer Applicants Are Failing IQ and Psychological Tests, Personnel Says as Senators Cast Doubt Bryan's 1,200 Jobs Goal

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Senators Donna Frett-Gregory, Janelle Sarauw and Kurt Vialet peruse Governor Bryan's two-year budget proposal during a hearing on Thurs. June 3 as OMB Director Jenifer O'Neal looks on. By. CHAUNTE HERBERT, LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

In Governor Albert Bryan's proposed two-year budget proposal, the administration said it projected funds will be available for filling over 1,200 positions in government — a large percentage of which was revealed to be tied to corrections officers and opportunities at the V.I. Police Department. But senators during a budget overview hearing on Wednesday found the projection ambitious considering many departments have held vacancies for years and continue to struggle with filling important positions.

During the hearing, Senator Marvin Blyden pointed to difficulty in past years relative to hiring individuals, and he asked testifiers for clarity on the administration's strategy.

Dayna Clendinen, director of the Division of Personnel explained that D.O.P. has been working with all departments relative to recruitment. She also said that in the months of July and August, the recruitment effort will focus on the U.S. mainland in a campaign to invite Virgin Islanders back to the territory.

Mr. Blyden argued that "there are many Virgin Islanders in the territory that are qualified, ready, willing and able." He asked Ms. Clendinen whether there were "hiccups" in hiring locals. "Some of it is qualifications, what is required for the position," she responded.

Senator Janelle Sarauw used a point of information to state, "The E.D.C. companies pay \$2,500 a year to the Department of Labor for the specific purpose of recruiting Virgin Islanders from away to come back home and not a dollar of that fund has been spent and I think the account has approximately \$3 million in it for recruitment. I wanted to make the financial team aware, Director Clendinen that you do have funding for that purpose."

Senator Samuel Carrion asked whether there were plans to hire an agency to assist in recruitment to fill the vacancies, to which Ms. Clendinen responded, "not at this point."

Mr. Carrion followed up by asking which vacancies were new compared to existing openings, but testifiers could not provide an immediate answer.

Mr. Carrion also questioned whether there was special priority given to positions attached to federal funding, and the response was no. Mr. Carrion stated, "I think it's something we need to look into especially if we could lose federal funds."

Chairman of the Committee of Finance, Senator Kurt Vialet, agreed. "I think focus must be given to federal positions," he said, contending that federal dollars will be lost "because they are going to say we didn't need it."

Senator Novelle Francis noticed some significant increases in certain departments and sought clarity. Office of Management and Budget Director, Jenifer O'Neal, said those were vacancies. "So this is basically a wishlist," Mr. Francis responded, "in terms of the budgets that would be allotted to these agencies because we have not been able to fill these positions in the past and I think it will be highly difficult for us to fill them in FY 2022."

Ms. Clendinen said a lot of those positions were related to corrections officers and jobs in the V.I. Police Department. However, while many applicants were passing the standard test, they were failing IQ and psychological tests.

"We have been recruiting and we've gotten a lot of interest in people actually applying," she said. "We've even implemented a strategy where people that could not pass the test before, we've reached out to them and invited them to come back to apply. We've worked with the Bureau of Corrections to offer and pay for the study material for them. That works."

"The hurdle, or the difficult part we're finding is for these persons to pass that psychological or the IQ. That is proving to be the difficulty. They pass the test, they get through the physical part of it, [but] when it comes to the IQ and psychological, you have a high percentage failing and can't move forward so we need to take a look at that."

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory took issue with an executive decision ratified by the Legislature that pins corrections officers who've spent up to 15 years at the Bureau at a \$40,000 salary. However, a new hire gets a \$40,000 starting salary, which she said needed to be corrected.

"This is why the employees in this government are so disgruntled," she said. "It's wrong. And three years later we are still having this conversation... It's our responsibility as leaders of this territory and those that sit in the executive branch's leadership financial management team to fix it."

Later during the hearing, Mr. Vialet asked Ms. O'Neal whether the effort to fill 1,200 jobs in government was a wishlist, or whether those positions were really needed at this time.

Ms. O'Neal responded, "We asked every department to submit their needs not their wants and this is what we got," she said, adding that the final list submitted to the Senate was actually trimmed from what was received.