The Virgin Islands Consortium

Manpower Shortage, Not Enough Community Support and Focus on Covid-19 Affecting Crime-Fighting Initiatives, Officials Say

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VIPD vehicles on Melvin Evans Highway heading to a crime scene. By. VI CONSORTIUM

Several local officials on Tuesday pointed to reasons they believe crime continues to plague the U.S. Virgin Islands. From Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach, who spoke about the territory's focus on the Covid-19 pandemic, to V.I.P.D. Criminal Investigation Bureau Commander Naomi Joseph, who said the community has not been sufficiently doing its part relative to providing information to law enforcement.

Another issue is the lack of adequate manpower, according to Deputy Police Chief for the St. Croix District, Sean Santos, though he said the V.I.P.D. has been able to perform its duties.

On the Covid focus, Mr. Roach said, "It just seems so counterintuitive that at a time when all of our efforts are directed at trying to keep our people alive and safe from a pandemic, still others use the opportunity to engage in criminal conduct."

Law enforcement employed at various government departments and agencies oftentimes supplement the V.I. Police Department to help combat crime. However, these officers are now assigned to the Covid-19 Task Force, whose role is to enforce rules and policies put in place by the Bryan administration against the pandemic.

As of Tuesday there were 50 Virgin Islanders who have died from Covid-related causes, according to the V.I. Dept. of Health.

Mr. Roach said he spoke with V.I.P.D. Commissioner Nominee Ray Martinez following the homicide Tuesday morning on Carlton Road on St. Croix, and that Mr. Martinez discussed an initiative that the lieutenant governor said was in its nascent stages and would be imprudent to divulge.

Asked by the Consortium whether the police force was experiencing a shortage of manpower, Dep. Chief Santos stated, "We are experiencing some manpower issues." He added that those issues were not "impacting us to the point where we are not doing our jobs. I won't say that it's impacting us to the point where we're not out there patrolling. We are out there and we are doing what we can for the community."

St. Croix in particular has been experiencing a wave of criminal activity in the last few weeks, from armed robberies, carjackings, home invasions and homicides. Relative to the reported armed robberies, carjackings and homicides, the police force as of Tuesday had not made any arrests, according to Dep. Chief Santos. However, he provided comment on an unreported shooting that occurred in Estate Castle Burke Monday, stating that the V.I.P.D made an arrest and that no one was hurt.

Pressed by the Consortium on whether the police force would update and tweak strategies to combat criminal activity, especially incidents that appear to be prevalent, the deputy chief stated, "We do take the information that we receive from our analysts with the crime stats that we have in the different locations, and we do put our officers in those strategic areas. Now, if there is a particular crime where it calls for surveillance operations, we do work toward that goal. But like [Commander Joseph] said earlier, one of our biggest help is the members of our community because trust me, there are members of the community that have this information. They know what's going on and they don't come forward and say anything."

Dep. Chief Santos said the department is aware of the fear of one's identity being exposed. "But I could guarantee you that I have worked with the Investigations Bureau here for the V.I.P.D., and they keep this information to where they are not jeopardizing anyone," he said.

Commander Joseph spoke passionately about the community's historic hesitance to provide information to police, highlighting the issue as one of the bottlenecks in catching

criminals. She identified the deceased victim in Tuesday's homicide as Victor Burgos, age 42, and stated, "We don't know Mr. Burgos, we don't know his lifestyle, we don't know his background but the community knows. You know who he is, you know what's going on and we're asking you to please help us so we could bring some type of closure for the family."

CDR Joseph added, "This is not just germane to this gentleman but to all of the homicides that we've been encountering and all the shootings, the violent crimes... We don't know it, you do. You're holding the information to your chest while more people get harmed. I'm just asking please call 911, call Crime Stoppers, call 340-778-4950, call 340-712-6092. Call us. We need your help because we cannot solve crime without the bigger police force, you the community at large."

The territory's homicide count for 2021 as of Tuesday was thirty-one: 24 on St. Croix, 6 on St. Thomas, and 1 on St. John.

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