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Police Department Filling Shortage Gap With Community Service Officers, Use of Technology, Karl Knight Says

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The V.I. Police Department is mulling the use of drone technology for use in rural areas of the USVI community, said Karl Knight, chief of staff to Governor Albert Bryan. By. GETTY IMAGES

A shortage of police officers has caused the Virgin Islands Police Department to focus on the use of technology and to revive a section of the law that provides for the employment of community service officers as aides to the department.

“We recognize one of the issues we have in our community is that law enforcement is not as popular a career as it used to be for various reasons. People enter in law enforcement but they end

up being security guards and different things,” said Karl Knight, chief of staff to Governor Albert Bryan, earlier this week.

Pointing out that the chronic shortage of officers is something he has observed for his entire adult life, Mr. Knight said that currently there are new creative approaches and tactics to fill the gap. “One of those tactics is technology. We are leaning on technology more now to kind of fill in the gaps and the voids,” he said.

Another initiative undertaken is the appointment of community service officers. “We have pioneered a program called community service officers. It's actually an old part of the [law] that was always there that calls for having these officers to augment the Police Department,” said Mr. Knight as he shared the role of the officers who do not have the power to arrest.

“They don’t carry a weapon, but they are basically on a path where they can assist the Police Department like monitoring the cameras, like helping with some of the Covid-19 enforcement, crowd control and certainly they are in the position that if they see a situation going out of hand, they can ring for back up and have those fully qualified officers show up,” he said.

“This allows us to kind of utilize the trained post-certified officers a little more efficiently because we have some other folks that can fill in the gaps. We are hoping that those community officers will eventually go on to become fully certified police officers themselves. We look at this as a way to whet their appetite and get them into the V.I.P.D.,” said Mr. Knight, who disclosed that the Bryan administration has also brought back the Police Auxiliary which will help to augment the manpower of the Police Department.

On the use of technology, Mr. Knight said, “We cannot station a police officer in every street corner, but we can use technology and there are two particular things that we have been using. Firstly, we have been using the Shot Spotter Gun Detection System, we've been expanding that network which allows us to have a quicker response,” he said while explaining that the Shot Spotter system alerts the Police Department when gunshots are fired even if there are no phone-ins from concern citizens.

Mr. Knight said the governor gets a briefing every morning that indicates how many rounds were fired and in which neighborhoods the rounds were fired.

Besides the gun detection system, the Police Department has also been deploying cameras to assist in fighting crimes and keeping the territory safe. “We have had a major push to deploy cameras. We have right now over 80 cameras installed and functional being monitored in the territory. We continue to install cameras, ultimately we have funds for the installation of about 200 cameras,” he revealed during an interview with Nykole Tyson, the host of “I’m Making it Happen.”

“So, we continue to push the technology aspects, we are talking about using drone technology. There are certain rural parts of our islands that you know is hard to track criminal activity and we know that folks when they are trying to get away, they use the remote roads,” said Mr. Knight, who pointed out that a drone flying overhead can quickly provide a big picture of the movement.

“Eventually, we hope to get to a point where we can outfit them with infra-red technology that some police department use,” he said.