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Education Acts Swiftly to Pay School Lunch Workers Following Statement From Sarauw; Senator Concerned About Scope of Payments

Government / **Published On January 07, 2022 08:45 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **January 07, 2022**

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The V.I. Department of Education, in partnership with the Office of the Governor and the Office of Management and Budget, will compensate school lunch workers up to \$2,000 with federal funds received through the American Rescue Plan for work performed during the Covid-19 pandemic, a release the department issued Friday morning has made known.

The one-time payments are being processed and are on schedule to be released to employees by Jan. 31, D.O.E. said.

The announcement comes on the heels of a statement from Senator Janelle Sarauw, who on Thursday [called on the department to pay V.I. Feeding Initiative workers](#) the \$1,000 each that was

allocated to them through a bill that Ms. Sarauw sponsored that was signed into law.

On Friday, the senator told the Consortium she was aware of the department's press release issued today that emphasized a plan Education said was already in place and superseded her allocation.

"The clapback level of politics is nauseating," Ms. Sarauw said. "The workers of the food initiative program were clearly an afterthought. I noted that they were left out and wrote an amendment to make them whole. Funds were to be expended by Dec. 31, 2021. The intent was to make them whole by the holidays. The ball was dropped, the law wasn't followed and now we want to use federal funds (ARPA) to pay those workers. So what does that mean for the \$200k that's already moved?"

The senator also noted that D.O.E.'s plan only mentions school lunch workers. "Our bill included more than school lunch. We included monitors, bus drivers and all workers who assisted with the initiative," Ms. Sarauw said.

"The monitors were dragging coolers and lifting them, so were bus drivers. I have a problem if their intent is only school lunch workers. When we asked for the data from Education in July/August, we made sure that Education included them in the aggregate amount.

"Food was prepared in the kitchens then packed in coolers. They were heavy. The cooks are ladies and older, so the monitors would drag the coolers of drink, food and snacks to the buses. If you open a yellow school bus, it is high lift to get them in the bus. The manual labor component of the operation included monitors and bus drivers," the senator said.

Even so, D.O.E. said its plan was already in place ahead of local funding made available through Bill No. 34-0082 (Act 8473) that called for \$1,000 in compensation to school lunch workers.

According to the release, Ms. Sarauw was made aware via testimony submitted to the Senate Committee on Finance for a hearing scheduled for Sept. 21, 2021, that the Bryan administration had plans underway to provide school lunch workers with a much more robust compensation package. As part of the administration's plan, school lunch workers will receive compensation between \$1,250 to \$2,000, depending on their specific job title, D.O.E. said.

"The department was able to achieve this with federal funds, made available for this purpose, to compensate school lunch workers who kept the department running at the height of the pandemic," said Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin. "Our school lunch workers who prepared nutritious meals for students are deserving of this compensation."

Ms. Berry-Benjamin further pointed out that it was more financially prudent to tap into the large reserve of federal funds, rather than to draw from the GVI's general fund.

"We have access to significant amounts of federal dollars in order to recover from the pandemic, so it made better sense for us to use these funds and increase the dollar amount to employees, rather than use our limited local funds," she said. "We appreciate the efforts of the senator and will seek to reprogram the general fund for other purposes."

The senator said it was approaching the fourth month since her bill was signed into law yet no payments — either from her bill that allocated \$1,000 per food initiative worker or from the CARES Act funding the Dept. of Education said today was already being prepared — were issued.

"When did they receive ARPA funds? Why is it taking so long to release the funds? And if the plan was in place prior to the writing of the bill, why did he [Governor Bryan] not line-item veto that part?" she said.

"Its always politics at play for some; for me its about the people," the senator concluded.

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