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Bill Merging EMS and Fire Service Crosses First Senate Hurdle and is Expected to be Signed Into Law by Governor Bryan

Government / **Published On March 10, 2022 05:13 AM /**

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An ambulance in Golden Rock, St. Croix on January 24, 2022. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

Approximately five weeks after Governor Albert Bryan announced that he is looking forward to the integration of the V.I. Fire Service and the Emergency Medical Service, the Committee on Health, Hospital and Human Services on Wednesday approved a bill accomplishing this outcome. The measure has been forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting.

Bill 34-0101 is an Act amending Virgin Islands Code to create a new V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Services to provide fire prevention services, fire suppression services, emergency medical

services, and for the protection of life and property.

During Wednesday's hearing, the measure was intensely discussed not because committee members were objecting to the clauses in the legislation. Instead, the discussions focused on what would happen to employees affected by the merger.

"Let's not mix up the issues. I think we spent a lot of time mixing up the issues... This issue is a health and safety issue and a liability issue... It is not okay to grandfather — you could grandfather for other things but not where you're dealing with protecting the life of an individual," Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory told Andre Dorsey, president of the St. Thomas Firefighters Union who suggested that all workers receive automatic transfer by virtue of serving previously. Ms. Frett-Gregory was voicing concern to ensure that individuals who are not certified in EMS don't be allowed to integrate with EMS personnel without the requisite certification.

It was pointed out by V.I. Fire Service Director Daryl George that most of the employees who were hired under probationary terms are still listed as probation officers and some have failed to complete recommended continuing education certification for their specialty. Mr. George's statement provided support to Ms. Frett-Gregory's concerns.

He said that at least seven employees were not cooperating to gain certification despite receiving several extensions to the deadline. The position of Firefighter-EMT requires that the applicant must acquire full Emergency Medical Technician certification. This has been a requirement for new recruits since 2013.

Along with improving fire prevention and emergency medical services, the measure also calls for hiring additional fire and EMS professionals which may reduce overtime earned by each employee. Some have earned up to \$50,000 annually because of overtime pay, according to testimony provided Wednesday.

The bill was eventually approved with amendments. Senator Novelle Francis, chairman of the Committee on Health, Hospital and Human Services explained after members voted to approve the bill that one of the amendments "limits the number of new positions offered by appointments by striking any reference to the deputy emergency chief."

"It also provides for the submission of the integration plan into the legislation no later than 90 days following passage of the Act," Mr. Francis said. Additionally, the measure eliminates the requirement for immediate transfer of employees by providing 180 days to facilitate employee transfers, Mr. Francis said.

When Governor Bryan delivered his State of the Territory address on January 24th, Mr. Bryan said he was looking to the Legislature for forward movement on the merger bill.

Sharing some justification at the time, the governor stated, "The integration of the Fire Service and the Emergency Medical Service is good for the people of the Virgin Islands. It is suitable for you, me, or anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves in a medical emergency. My commissioners, directors and I have met with the unions and the employees from Fire and EMS on multiple occasions."

He said that fire stations have the capacity to accommodate EMS and firefighters in the territory have excelled in their Emergency Medical Response certification courses. Additionally, both Fire and EMS employees have demonstrated a passion for delivering the best service possible to the people of the Virgin Islands, he said.

“We are not reinventing the wheel,” the governor said in January. “The merger is in accordance with a well-established and growing movement towards shared services worldwide. It demonstrates a commitment to the public’s safety by decreasing emergency response time through the strategic deployment of Fire and EMS personnel from ten additional locations throughout the territory. Senators, no one should die waiting for an ambulance.”

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