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15 Years Later, V.I. Fire Service and EMS Become One Unit; Bryan Sets Aside \$1 Million For New Equipment, Training for EMS Personnel

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Linda Straker **April 11, 2022**

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Fifteen years after the first attempt was made to integrate the V.I. Fire Service and the Emergency Medical Services, that effort became a reality when Governor Albert Bryan signed Bill 34-0101 into law on Friday during an enactment ceremony.

It is an Act amending the Virgin Islands Code to add a unit within the existing Virgin Islands Fire Service for emergency medical services, and to establish the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services to provide fire prevention services, fire suppression services, emergency medical services, and for the protection of life and property.

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said the two government agencies have acted in silo in the past and have competed for similar funding. The agencies also have argued in many situations that they are too underfunded and understaffed to adequately meet the needs of the community, according to the health commissioner.

"This integration breaks down those silos and creates collaboration and enhances communication," she said. "The regulatory arm of the Department of Health will continue to work hand-in-hand with the Department of EMS Fire and their divisions to continue consistently upholding the standards of the national EMS code. This is indeed an exciting day for each and every one of us ...the department is here to support and advance EMS Fire," she said during her remarks.

Governor Albert Bryan also expressed excitement about finally seeing the long-sought merger come to fruition, and said if the integration was in place for the 2017 hurricanes, there is the possibility that death would have been reduced.

"Fifteen years we have been trying to get this bill passed. I remember way back in the John de Jongh Administration the weeping, the wailing and the gnashing of teeth trying to get this through the Legislature, and finally the administration turning its head and taking on more important things," he said before speaking about the significant importance of the integration.

"If we had done it then we would have been in better shape when Irma and Maria struck the islands," the governor said.

"If we had done it then imagine the people that may have survived because Virgin Islanders could respond not from one spot but from five or six locations throughout the territory. I am really proud today to say that we got it done," he stated.

The governor said that though the bill has been signed into law, there is a lot of work still to be done because there is now a need to train Virgin Islanders. "We are putting our money where our mouth is by dedicating at least \$1 million of American Rescue Plan Act funds towards training EMS personnel, buying new equipment, and making sure that our firehouses are equipped with everything that they need to respond," he said.

In a recent "Inside the Cabinet," Daryl George, director of Virgin Islands Fire Services said that establishing the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services will be good for the territory and as part of this new vision, there will be many steps to get the integration completed.

"This will have us placing first response vehicles, quick attack vehicles and emergency response vehicles in strategic locations throughout the Virgin Islands," he said. "The integration is great for us as a territory." Mr. George disclosed during the program that there are currently 245 firefighters in the territory.

As a result of the integration, every fire station will have some type of medical response. In the bigger stations, there will be an ambulance and in the smaller stations, there will be quick response vehicles, he said.