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Payne Dismisses Allegations Made Against Him By Three Women; VIPD Refutes Claim That He Was Cleared of Matter Involving Chezni Jones

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Senator Steven Payne plays drums with a carnival troupe during V.I. Carnival 2022 in St. Thomas. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

After over a month of silence, Senator Steven Payne has issued a statement calling the Consortium's reporting on the allegations of sexual harassment and assault against him inaccurate, slanderous, and defamatory.

The [statement](#) attempts to rebut the claims made by Mr. Payne's accusers. First, it dismisses the claims of his Senate office employee. The statement reads in part "video surveillance definitively showed that no employee had misplaced nor lost their luggage in the legislature building, and that

Senator Payne never removed any property which belonged to the employee, but instead had gone into the building and left only carrying his laptop."

However, the Consortium's report about the allegations made against Mr. Payne by one of his young, female employees never spoke about activity at the Legislature building. Instead, the publication cited trusted sources with knowledge of the matter who told us that the female complainant was among other employees traveling from St. Thomas to St. Croix and staying at a hotel as part of their Senate duties with Mr. Payne's office. This employee allegedly realized that her luggage was missing and made inquiries with other employees of Mr. Payne's office. Still unable to find the luggage, she allegedly approached Mr. Payne outside his hotel room to ask whether he knew what happened to the luggage. Mr. Payne allegedly had the luggage, and it was then that he allegedly invited the employee to stay in his room, an alleged action the employee is said to have refused.

The Office of Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory subsequently issued a statement confirming that an investigation was launched into the allegations against Mr. Payne.

Since our report, the initial investigation into the allegation made by the employee, which was being probed by a team whose lead was Senate Vice President Novelle Francis, was [escalated to the Senate Committee Ethical Conduct](#), a development indicating that the initial investigatory team that comprised of Mr. Francis and the executive director of the Legislature, found enough probable cause to initiate a wider investigation.

The Consortium first broke the story [on April 7th](#), and our original report and all subsequent follow-ups are still available on our website.

The statement then went on to address the [allegations made by Chezni Jones](#), which Ms. Jones [first posted on Facebook in 2018](#). It was then picked up by the Consortium in April following the complaint made against Mr. Payne by one of his young staffers. The post described a day in 2005 when a much-younger Jones accompanied the senator to a beach in St. John. Payne was an officer of the V.I. Police Department at the time, and was helping Jones train as part of her efforts to join the police academy, Jones said. Payne was assigned to a local school and Jones was an employee at the learning institution. During a series of exclusive interviews with Consortium journalists, Jones recounted her memories of the alleged incident that she said transformed the now-senator in her eyes from trusted mentor to dangerous predator, saying, "He suggested that we go to the beach so that, you know, nobody won't say anything by seeing us practicing and stuff like that. He felt that we needed to be discreet."

Jones, who did not hide her identity when coming forward, says that once at the beach, Payne soon began to encourage her to grab his private area, and quickly became so aggressive that he ended up ripping her underwear.

Payne's statement contends that these claims were "aggressively and thoroughly investigated by the Internal Affairs Bureau of the VIPD and then Sgt. Payne was exonerated after proving that the sexual harassment claim was false."

Immediately after receiving the statement from Senator Payne, Consortium journalists contacted Police Commissioner Ray Martinez, who looked at the findings of the IA probe which was opened in January 2018 and closed in September of that year. Mr. Martinez said that the V.I.P.D.'s findings did not clear the Mr. Payne. "Our disposition of the case simply says that it was not sustained, and not sustained means that we could not prove or disprove the allegation," Mr.

Martinez told the Consortium Friday afternoon, comments that stand in stark contrast to the senator's statement that says he was exonerated by the police department.

Payne's statement went on to address his third accuser, 21-year old Steffi Emilien, who spoke without the cover of anonymity to claim that the then-VIPD officer sexually assaulted her on more than one occasion when she was between the ages of 16 and 17. About her allegations, the senator first intimated that he would not publicly comment until the matter had been forwarded to the Attorney General's office, but in the next sentence went on to call the young woman's tearful assertions "salacious and unfounded".

The statement ends with a declaration of the senator's "complete and unwavering innocence," and asserts that his name and reputation will ultimately be restored.

After we received Senator Payne's statement, Consortium journalists once again attempted to contact him for comment, but as has been the case since earlier in the week, were unsuccessful.

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