

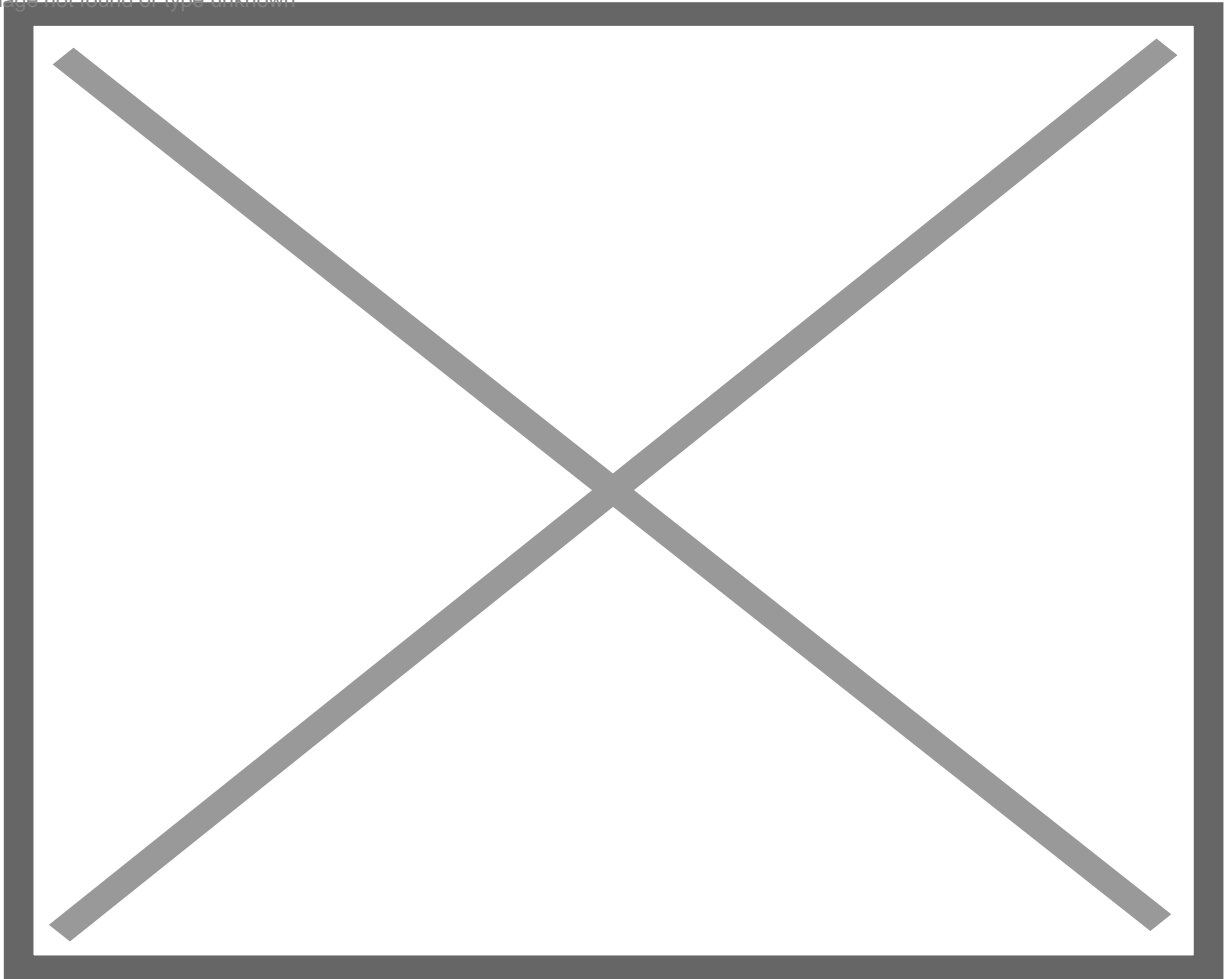
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Senators Rebuke Office of Gun Violence Prevention For Lack of Results. It's a 'Total Waste of Taxpayers Money,' Says Gittens.

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The need to reduce instances of gun violence in the U.S. Virgin Islands took center stage on Tuesday, with senators on the Committee of Finance questioning the readiness of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention to counteract gun crimes in the territory.

When senators gathered to discuss the budget of the Office of the Governor and Bureau of Economic Research, they grilled Antonio Manuel, the director of Office of Gun Violence Prevention on the apparent lack of tangible outcomes to begin to address the decades-long problem.

"We are wasting time and we don't have time to waste because we are talking about lives," stressed Senator Marvin Blyden.

Vice Chair, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory and Senator Janelle Sarauw were not convinced that the Office has covered all its bases by meeting with and assessing nonprofit organizations, members of the court system or the Department of Justice — all of whom the senators suggested could help the office execute its duties.

"We can't continue to fund divisions, activity centers etc. absent of us knowing exactly what direction the territory is going in as it relates to the entity," said Ms. Frett-Gregory.

Gun violence becomes a public health issue and in turn the ripple effect that it gives impacts the economy," said Ms. Sarauw who advised the office to use data available at the various local agencies to begin to formulate a plan.

Their inquiries were followed by that of Committee Chair Senator Kurt Vialet, who questioned whether the consultants assisting the office were familiar with the demographics of the Virgin Islands and why these crimes were continuing to happen.

In the two decades from 2000 to 2020, [863 people in the territory died as a result of homicides](#). The trend has continued through 2021 and looks on track to continue this year.

In an effort to reassure the committee of the office's commitment, Karl Knight, chief of staff to Governor Albert Bryan Jr., shared that the consultant institution — John Jay College — developed "familiarity" with the workings of the territory after conducting a "conditional assessment" during the former administration's term in office.

"This time around now we're actually pushing to actually effectuate and use that data," he said.

But his explanation was shut down by Mr. Vialet who insisted that the college was unable to understand some dynamics that Mr. Vialet said need to be "directly addressed." This sentiment was echoed by Ms. Frett-Gregory, telling the office that John Jay College is not the answer.

She expressed, "Our answer is, how are we looking at cradle to grave; how are we looking at our university; how we are looking at our data; how we are looking at our test scores; how we are looking at our dropout rate. What is it that we are looking at to determine what is the effect of this cause? That's my frustration with this conversation."

Senator Kenneth Gittens, who reiterated that he thought the department was "a total waste of tax payers' money," pointed to the lack of staff [two years](#) after the Senate approved the establishment of the Office.

Realistically, Mr. Manuel said, the office should be staffed with 13 employees but presently he is the only one on staff. They are hoping to have a contingent of at least three people by the end of the fiscal year in September 2022.

"We are in the process of building a resource list and that's taking time" ... "It takes time to get that information and we're doing our best to get it," he contended.

In his closing statement, Mr. Knight asked that the office be given a fair chance to achieve its mandate.

“We are taking our time to make sure that we build that unit correctly so it can be a functional and effective unit and you will have my personal commitment that it does what it is supposed to do and that includes the community engagement and ultimately getting there with the potential at-risk individuals and engaging them heads-on and directly,” he implored.

The Office of Gun Violence Prevention has the third highest budgetary allocation at \$219,028 of the governor's requested budget of \$11,121,162 and has been listed as one of its priority areas for the upcoming fiscal year.

The Gun Violence Prevention bill was passed in 2020 to create a dedicated office that would bring government agencies, nonprofits and community advocates together to address gun violence in the territory.

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