

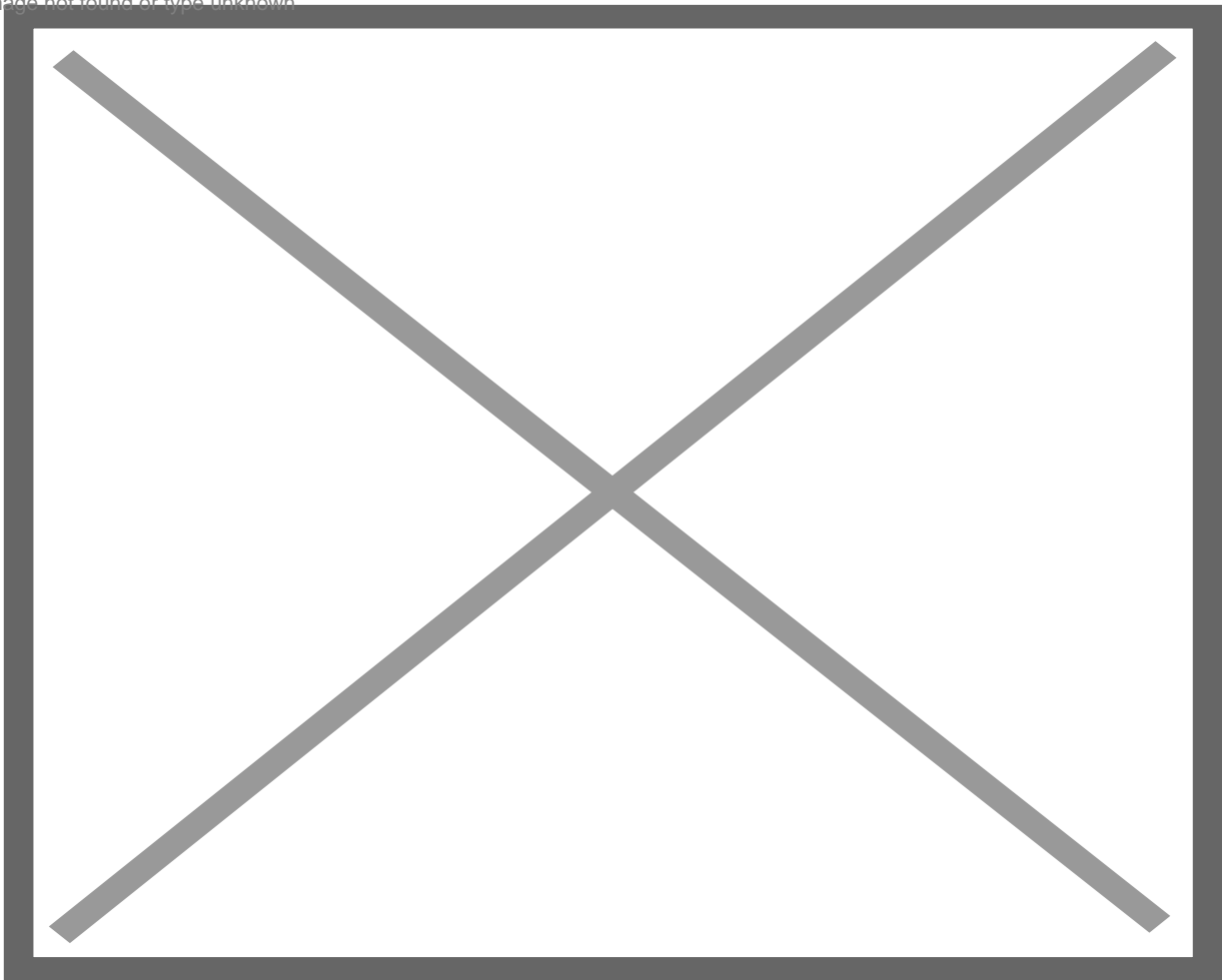
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VIPD Facing Acute Employee Shortage With 43 Personnel on Extended Leave, Leading to Higher Overtime Payouts and Burnout; Senators Question Budget Decrease

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V.I. Police Commissioner Ray Martinez testified on Wed. Aug. 10, 2022 in the V.I. Legislature. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

When the Committee on Finance met Wednesday, they questioned whether the V.I. Police Department had presented a budget reflective of the actual funds it needed to operate the department for the next fiscal year.

The VIPD has asked for \$71,372,356, which is \$6,350,274 less than the \$77,722,630 which was appropriated to the department for the year 2022.

With so much left to do to maintain and improve the police force in the Virgin Islands, Committee Chairman Kurt Vialet said he did not think the requested amount was “adequate” to fund the department.

The VIPD needs to pay overtime, recruit more staff, conduct major repairs on its buildings and contend with almost half a million dollars yearly increase in rental fees among other funding needs.

That is why Senator Donna Frett-Gregory said she too does not believe the request is enough, as she urged Police Commissioner Ray Martinez to realistically reflect the amounts needed to protect and serve Virgin Islanders.

“We don’t sacrifice our VIPD for all the other things that we’re seeing in here [budget]. That’s a problem,” she remarked, telling Mr. Martinez that the department needed to give the Legislature the cost of what it needs to operate.

Although personnel services and fringe benefits account for 80 percent — more than \$56 million of the requested 2023 budget — the request for funding is still lower than the last budget. Personnel services, for example, was reduced by more than \$5.5 million for 2023.

Overtime costs were however increased from \$17 million in 2022 to a proposed \$22 million for 2023. The department anticipates that in 2023, \$22 million would be needed to cover overtime payment, as the VIPD struggles to keep active officers. It is an increase of \$3 million from last fiscal year.

As of August 10, VIPD said it expended \$40,742,684 on personnel services which includes \$17 million in overtime and \$11,943,054 on fringe benefits, which led Senator Carla Joseph to believe that the budget reduction was insufficient to meet the department’s operational needs.

The overtime monies spent to date includes \$1.2 million paid to the Covid Task Force, but which is expected to be reimbursed to the department. Still, the remaining \$15.8 million is \$1.9 million more than the \$13.9 million appropriated by the Legislature for overtime in the 2022 budget.

“Your cut is not going to help you. You’re going to need that money because you have already expended almost your entire budget,” Ms. Joseph said. “You’re not going to be able to protect and serve us, your citizens, in the manner that you need to do and especially if you are looking to also ramp up your personnel services.”

Senator Janelle Sarauw questioned the commissioner on how he planned to manage such large payouts for overtime to which he responded, “That is an issue that I, myself has been really working on directly with HR, with our personnel within internal affairs.”

The overtime assists in filling the gap of 43 employees who are currently on extended leave and are unable to respond to police needs. According to Mr. Martinez, there are nine civilian employees and 34 sworn officers out on extended leave consisting of Military, Sick, and assignment to the Unclassified Service.

He said the department has been pushing some of these workers on forced retirement as they are of no use to the department while they remain out of commission for long periods. “We’ve been

moving folks to forced retirement, to termination," he said. "If you can't help us then we need to move you in the direction where you need to be."

To begin to fill the shortage of workers, the department is proposing that lawmakers fund the recruitment of 49 police officer and 18 police auxiliary positions for 2023. But Mr. Martinez said the VIPD would need 35 officers and 20 more auxiliary staff per district to begin to solve the problem of staff shortage.

"Those numbers would lend tremendously to decreasing some of our overtime expenditures, some of the burnout that we're experiencing with our rank and file at this time as well as increasing the longevity of some of the officers that we have," he explained.

Currently, the police department has 180 civilian employees, 317 Police Officers, and 16 other sworn personnel. In 2022, it hired 17 individuals in civilian positions and 15 police and auxiliary recruits but during that period, a total of 36 employees also separated from the department - 12 in the St. Thomas/St. John District, 6 of which were police officers and 24 in the St. Croix District of which 16 were police officers.

In addition to those losses, it is projected that 70 sworn and two civilian personnel will be eligible to retire in the St. Thomas District, while 52 sworn, and 7 civilian personnel will be eligible for retirement in the St. Croix District. Over the next two years, an additional 13 sworn and 3 civilian personnel qualify for retirement territory-wide.