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WAPA Slammed in Senate For Hiring Non-Resident For Safety Director Job

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WAPA's Richmond Powerplant. By. GETTY IMAGES

Senators could do little to hold back their disappointment after hearing from the V.I. Water and Power Authority that it had hired a director of safety from outside of the territory, instead of promoting a staff member from within the organization.

Josh Jones was hired to replace the former director who resigned from the company earlier this year, after being employed at WAPA since 2013. Mr. Jones is being paid about \$30,000 more to serve in the same position.

According to WAPA's Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director Andrew Smith, Mr. Jones's primary experience is in the field of transmission and distribution in addition to having 12

years of experience working in the field of safety. He said however that Mr. Jones is expected to “rely on others” in areas of “subject matters expertise” including water operation and storage distribution.

The senators heard that in addition to making a salary of \$140,000 a year, Mr. Jones is entitled to a \$1,000 housing allowance for one year and would be relocated to the territory with his family.

“We have some local guys that have been working in safety for quite some time with lots of experience. As a matter of fact, some with way more experience than Mr. Josh Jones. So, how do we skip by the local guys them, and bring someone in that we’re going to have to pay all the benefits for,” questioned Senator Franklin Johnson.

Mr. Johnson noted that WAPA’s injury rate had reduced by more than half from 29 incidents in 2013 to 11 in 2021, utilizing the same staffers who were “overlooked” for the job.

“This got to stop. We cannot continue operating like this and expect the men and women who are here busting their groin, doing a real good job to be bypassed ... it’s unfair; it is wrong,” he maintained.

But Mr. Smith insisted that the Selection Committee who interviewed the candidates were thorough and included a number of staffers from the safety department at WAPA. He said the recruiting process had gone on for at least three months and involved four interview sessions before a decision was reached.

But the authority said none of the three internal candidates who are members of the safety department and who interviewed for the position of director of safety, made it to the final round of interview.

“We interviewed multiple internal candidates [and] we interviewed multiple external candidates; we also received two or three resumes from Virgin Islanders or at least people who’ve lived in the territory for the role,” said Mr. Smith.

He said he had hoped that the new hire could help change the “safety culture” at WAPA which he reports as being currently “poor.”

"People in the field do not trust safety and there's a very poor relationship within the company around that. I think our safety team has best intentions, I think they try their hardest but that's a relationship that I feel like we need to rebase and that's what we're attempting to do," he explained.

Even after hearing Mr. Smith’s explanation, Senator Carla Joseph, chair of the Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection advised WAPA to rethink its decision, citing that it was unfair to employees who had worked for the authority for years.

“It is an injustice to have people who working day in and day out and you and your team don’t see that they are committed ... This decision, I definitely would rethink it if you want to get the best performance from your people,” she said.

It was also revealed during the Senate hearing that two district managers had previously served as acting safety director and others have served as acting safety managers while WAPA looked to fill the vacancy.

Mr. Smith said while they did not give the job of director to a current staffer, they have promoted 20 other staff members for the year.

“Twenty of the positions that we filled this year were promotions from within. So, it’s not that we don’t promote internally, it’s not that we don’t give opportunity, but we also need the right people in the right roles,” he said.

Other senators frowned upon the decision but did not delay the issue as they grilled WAPA about its business operations and future plans for almost nine hours on Wednesday.

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