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# Premium Pause? Approximately 100 Fire and Emergency Medical Services Personnel Haven't Received Pandemic Bonus

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When President Joe Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act into law on March 11, 2021, it included over [half a billion dollars](#) in funding for the U.S. Virgin Islands. Roughly \$40 million of that sum was dedicated to a program called Premium Pay, which sought to recognize the efforts of certain essential employees in the public and private sectors who had to serve the community during two lockdown periods declared by Governor Albert Bryan Jr. in 2020.

By January 2022, the territory was in receipt of the majority of its \$547 million allocation, and disbursement of Premium Pay checks was slated to begin in February. An income ceiling [was announced](#) - "If you make more than \$70,000 you cannot qualify to receive any Premium Pay at all," Director of the VI Office of Management and Budget Jenifer O'Neal, told Senator Kenneth

Gittens, during a January 2022 hearing of the Senate Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure.

A few weeks later, Governor Bryan clarified to the Consortium that the \$70,000 upper limit was with [respect to annual base pay](#); he reassured that overtime earned that brought total compensation over that threshold would not preclude an otherwise eligible worker from receiving a Premium Pay check. “Even if you make \$200,000 but your base pay is \$50,000 you still qualify,” the Governor said during an interview a year ago.

By the end of February, Governor Bryan said that because “cash was running slim,” distribution of these stimulus funds would be [pushed back until the summer](#), and in June, checks duly began to roll out to recipients in the private healthcare sector, with public workers expected to follow. At the time, then-Senator Kurt Vialet expressed concern with the timeline within which public sector employees were going to receive their Premium Pay funds, during a hearing of the 34th Legislature’s Finance Committee, which he chaired. “

In response, [Ms. O’Neal explained](#), “We started by asking the private sector to submit. We had over 800 applications to go through. We did ask the departments and agencies; we asked the hospitals to submit. It took a while, but we have everything now and we will be moving forward...they will be included as soon as the validation is done.”

Then, Ms. O’Neal assured the committee that “it’s not like we’re going to have to wait another two months or so to get their payments. It’s in line...We are starting with healthcare as a sector; we just have the private sector ready to go and the public sector is being validated now.”

As it turns out, it has taken a lot longer than two months for many workers. At the end of August 2021, only 7 of the \$40 million [had been disbursed](#), and a few days later Ms. O’Neal disclosed to lawmakers that the approvals process for government employees at the Bureau of Corrections, Department of Health and the two hospitals was still pending, because her office had yet to submit required information to the Department of Treasury. At a legislative hearing on August 30th, she indicated that the document would be submitted within [two to three weeks](#).

Four months later, during a Senate hearing this Tuesday, Senator Gittens, now chair of the 35th Legislature’s Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety learned that scores of employees within the Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) have yet to receive their small apportionment of the \$40 million Premium Pay package.

“To date all the employees have not received their premium pay. We have roughly a hundred employees whose premium pay is still outstanding,” said Barbara Williams-Browne, director of Human Resources & Payroll at the department.

Because of overtime worked, Williams-Browne said all the employees made over \$70,000 during the stimulus period. However, according to the assurances of the OMB and Governor Bryan last year, these employees are still entitled to receive a one-time payment of \$1,250 through the federal Premium Pay program.

A frustrated Senator Gittens said he plans to write to the OMB about the outstanding matter. “It’s almost like we’re punishing first responders as well as other frontline employees.... You mean to tell me that the federal government have provided an opportunity for me to get premium pay for the services because I can’t function at home, and now I’m not eligible just because I’ve been coming to work and I’m having to work overtime?”

It is not currently clear whether government employees outside the Fire and EMS Department have all received their Premium Pay funds, nor whether the disbursement to all eligible private sector employees has been completed.

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