

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VIPD Says It's Ramping Up Technology Solutions to Address Gun Violence

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The V.I. Police Department said Wednesday that it is bolstering existing technology solutions and seeking funding to implement new ones as part of ongoing efforts to reduce gun crime in the territory.

Police representatives testified before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety on Wednesday, following a grisly weekend on St. Croix where six people were shot, one fatally, while leaving a club.

That was one of several cases of gun violence so far this year on St. Croix. St. Thomas has had seven shooting incidents this year for a total of 13 territory-wide. "The firearms

are coming into our territory all the time,” Acting Assistant Police Commissioner for the St. Croix District, Sidney Elskoe told lawmakers.

The VIPD’s current surveillance system has resulted in the detection and seizure of a number of illegal firearms – 15 this year and a total of 79 in 2022 (45 on St. Croix, 30 on St. Thomas, and 4 on St. John). A new airport system has also resulted in the interception of several illegal firearms.

Police are hoping that this year, they can do more to increase those confiscations. Mr. Elskoe told senators that the department intends to utilize a \$1.5 million capital improvement project to purchase over 200 additional cameras - some fixed, some that can pan, tilt and zoom, and others that are tailored to read license plates - that will help to monitor “hot spots”.

“These cameras will be affixed in clusters at key locations of the islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John. The cameras will be further supported with the addition of ShotSpotter sensors to further bolster VIPD’s response time and effectiveness to [sic] fighting crime in the territory,” the assistant commissioner said.

According to Mr. Elskoe, the VIPD is currently working with the Bureau of Information Technology to secure a vendor that can meet the contract requirements and undertake a project of that magnitude. Once a vendor is secured and the project is complete, he said the department will continue the administration of the grant.

The VIPD is seeking more assistance for cameras, this time from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, to expand its complement of body-worn cameras, currently issued to every uniformed officer. The program expansion would issue cameras to all sworn police personnel as well as make some available to outside agencies that partner with VIPD.

“The department has deployed several body-worn cameras to support daily operations. The body-worn camera solution enables the department with an efficient process to share the video footage within a secure environment to the prosecutor’s office and other entities. And, most importantly, the asset ensures accountability on behalf of our employees and the community we serve,” the assistant commissioner shared.

The VIPD said it has expanded its ShotSpotter coverage area and says it will integrate the use of cameras to enable it to provide visual coverage of the activities being captured by the gun fire and detection system. The ShotSpotter technology listens for the sound of gunfire and triangulates the general location that shootings are occurring.

To further update its surveillance systems, the V.I.P.D. said it is planning to establish its Real-time Crime Center which offers new technological approaches to crime fighting in the territory. Other law enforcement entities will also benefit from the center’s capability to produce more situational awareness that Mr. Elskoe believes will reduce and even prevent crime. The department said it will partner with a leading software company to achieve this. “In the upcoming weeks we are moving forward with conversations with different vendors for the build out of the center and location solidification,” he shared.

To increase efficiency, the VIPD said it working with the Bureau of Information Technology and the Department of Property and Procurement to acquire an in-car networking system which will allow officers to remotely access key resources such as the

department's Incident and Accident reporting systems, while out in the field. "The officers will have the capability to write reports in their assigned vehicles. They will be able to remain on post instead of spending long periods of time off the street while completing administrative duties," Mr. Elskoe explained.

The improvements in technological capacity are expected to boost the work of police officers who continue to work 12-hour shifts on both St. Thomas and St. Croix. The work of the police department, the assistant commissioner said, becomes even more effective with the assistance of members of the public, which has been on the rise – leading to an "improved case closure rate."

"Our gratitude to the people of the Virgin Islands who report cannot be put into words. It is through this much improved relationship that we will continue to realize a reduction in gun violence in our community," Mr. Elskoe said.

Owing to the closeness of communities, Mr. Elskoe said there is some reluctance by some citizens to come forward because they are afraid of becoming victims of gun crime themselves. He noted however that the VIPD has technologies in place that act as a "nameless electronic witness that is fearless and cannot be threatened".

The assistant commissioner maintains that the majority of the gun crimes occurring in the territory is the work of a small group of repeat offenders.

"The United States Virgin Islands is not a lawless land which is ripe for sporadic criminal activity that cannot be predicted. The peaceful law-abiding citizens of the United States Virgin Islands are victimized by a small section of the community – recidivists who capitalize on the loopholes of an organized system of lawful due process," he said.