

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Emergency Hearing Called to Investigate High Level of Resignations and Terminations at Bureau of Corrections

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The Golden Grove Correctional Facility on St. Croix By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

Senator-at-Large Steven D. Payne, Sr., Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, Public Safety and Veterans Affairs, has scheduled an emergency hearing in an attempt to ascertain the extent of the crisis within the Virgin Islands Bureau of Correction.

The Committee will meet on Wednesday, February 13 at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall on St. Thomas.

The emergency hearing follows the Consortium's report of [mass resignations and a number of terminations](#) at the bureau under the leadership of new Director Wynnie Testamark. Two sources with intimate knowledge of the Bureau, one a former employee and the other who currently works at B.O.C., described Ms. Testamark as very disrespectful to her employees, some of them senior staff at the bureau. These sources also said that the bureau, already struggling under a federal consent decree and internal issues, was made worse by the new director, who they say operates the penitentiary facility with little regard for the input of support staff.

This led to a wave of resignations and terminations. From the legal council, to the HR manager, accounting manager, health services director, compliance manager, three corrections officers, executive assistant — all of whom resigned — to the chief investigator who was terminated, and the lock smith, fire/life safety manager who was also terminated along with the grants and programs manager. There were additional resignations from the labor relations person and the administrator, according to the two persons with intimate knowledge of the resignations and terminations, who requested anonymity to speak freely on what they described as a quiet crisis at the bureau.

The Consortium had contacted Ms. Testamark for comment. She answered the phone, listened to the publication's questions — from talk of her behavior to the resignations — and then said she was driving and would return the call. This was on Friday, Sept. 20, 2019. Ms. Testamark never returned the call.

The latest resignation was that of Golden Grove Correctional Facility Warden Joe Booker, whose last day at the facility was Thursday. B.O.C. spokesman Winthrop Maduro has said that Mr. Booker resigned amid an investigation of prison violations by some staff members and security issues, with the bureau appearing to say that those issues were a result of Mr. Booker's failed leadership.

But in [a response issued Thursday](#), Mr. Booker pushed back on the narrative that may have tied his resignation to failures at the bureau. "Under my tenure as warden, we weathered the effects of the hurricanes, implemented security measures, improved employee morale, and recruited and retained critical staff. The compliance assessment ratings increased to the highest ratings ever earned by the Bureau of Corrections in the history of the consent decree. The compliance assessment reports speak for themselves," he said. "While I will not delve into my reasons for resigning from the Bureau of Corrections or critique the Bureau of Corrections' current leadership, my resignation had absolutely nothing to do with any claimed internal investigation findings."

The officials of the B.O.C. have been invited to appear before the members of the committee to provide an update as it pertains to the high number of resignations, terminations, in major leadership roles, and the safety of agency," according to Mr. Payne's office. The committee will further require an update on the status of B.O.C. federal consent decree.

"As Chairman of the Committee which has the direct oversight of the operations of the B.O.C., it is my responsibility to ensure that the Agency is operating within the proper rules and regulations, policies and procedures, for the safety of the staff and the inmates that it serves," the At-Large senator said.

The Consortium will carry the hearing live on its website and [Facebook platform](#).

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