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VIPD Addresses Officer Training and Mental Health Crisis Response at Consent Decree Town Hall Meeting

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An aerial view of the John A. Bell Correctional Facility on St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Monday evening marked the first of three town hall meetings hosted by the V.I. Police Department to address the ongoing implementation of the consent decree, which has been in effect since 2009. The meeting, led by Jason Marsh, VIPD's deputy commissioner of professional standards, featured a panel consisting of senior VIPD officials and members of the independent monitoring team headed by Sydney Roberts, responsible for assessing compliance with the decree's stipulations.

The consent decree was established in March 2009 as a result of a federal lawsuit filed against the VIPD by the U.S. Department of Justice in response to alleged patterns and practices of civil rights violations. The federal government took action after the VIPD failed to fulfill required reforms following a 2004 investigation.

Over the years, the VIPD has made gradual progress in aligning its operations with the court-mandated requirements outlined in the consent decree. Despite acknowledging the financial burden placed on the department, Marsh emphasized that the decree has played a vital role in bringing about significant changes. These changes include the development of comprehensive policies and the establishment of a more transparent citizen complaint process. "The consent decree has made us a better agency," he said. "It mandated us to create policies, ensure appropriate training for our personnel, and engage our citizens more professionally."

During the town hall meeting, concerns were raised about the impact of the consent decree on the recruitment and retention of officers. Marsh explained that some older officers found it challenging to adapt to the more stringent standards and requirements, leading to retention difficulties. However, the recruitment of younger officers has remained unaffected, and the department is actively working to implement a cultural shift to better comply with the decree's stipulations.

Attendees also raised questions regarding the duration of investigations into potential officer misconduct or use of force cases, especially when investigations extend beyond the period during which disciplinary action can be taken. In response, Marsh clarified that the department's contracts allow for an extension of the disciplinary period during ongoing investigations. Earlier delays were attributed to personnel issues, prompting the department to hire and train individuals with the necessary skillset for conducting high-level investigations. The focus now is on cross-training officers to prevent future personnel-related delays.

Marsh also addressed the handling of officer-involved shootings referred to the Justice Department. He explained that the police send such matters to the Attorney General's Office for review, where a decision is made on whether laws were violated and if prosecution is warranted. All officer-involved shootings are investigated administratively and from a law enforcement perspective, ensuring a thorough examination of each case.

The meeting also delved into the pressing issue of how officers interact with individuals experiencing mental health crises, which often escalates to use-of-force situations. Marsh acknowledged this as a systemic issue, with the VIPD being the first response option due to the absence of dedicated mental health response units. While ensuring the safety of officers and the community, Marsh emphasized the importance of training officers to improve their response to individuals in mental health crises while seeking broader governmental solutions.

Members of the town hall audience urged the independent monitors to expedite the addition of local expertise to their team. Building trust in the community to obtain valuable, albeit sensitive, information from the public was deemed challenging without such local representation. Sydney Roberts agreed with this assertion and pledged to open up lines of communication through listening sessions and the establishment of a dedicated website for public engagement and updates.

Marsh highlighted the presence of an internal monitoring unit within the VIPD responsible for auditing cases, reviewing policies, and identifying areas requiring additional training. This unit will ensure continued adherence to the reforms mandated by the consent decree, even after the

departure of external monitors.

As the public forum concluded, Marsh pledged the VIPD's commitment to improving public engagement and encouraged residents to attend the upcoming town hall meetings in St. John on Tuesday and St. Croix on Wednesday.

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