

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Funding Concerns and Vague Policies Spark Debate on Gun Violence Prevention Office

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The Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance convened on June 15 to thoroughly assess the budget request for fiscal year 2024 presented by representatives of the Office of the Governor and other agencies. Among the various aspects scrutinized, significant attention was directed toward the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, its funding requirements, and its response to recent incidents of gun violence.

During the session, Karl Knight, Chief of Staff for Governor Albert Bryan Jr., outlined the comprehensive budget requirements for the Governor's Office. Notably, the proposed budget for the Office of the Governor for fiscal year 2024 amounts to \$10,440,023. This substantial allocation encompasses mandatory costs and initiatives for diverse offices.

Personnel costs constitute a significant portion, exceeding \$5.3 million or 50.9% of the overall budget.

Knight detailed the disbursement of funds across various agencies. The Bureau of Economic Research would receive \$1,025,159 to continue its pivotal role as the primary generator of data on economic growth and business development. Simultaneously, the Office of Gun Violence Prevention requested \$520,989 in funding to support staffing requirements and develop effective strategies aimed at reducing incidents of gun violence. Additionally, the Office of Health Information Technology, operating under the Office of the Governor's General Fund, secured \$250,000 from the Operational Expense Fund to establish itself as a comprehensive hub for health IT resources and solutions.

During his time for questioning, Senator Javan James Sr. grilled Office of Gun Violence & Prevention Director Antonio Emmanuel about the staff currently on board and plans for future hires. ... "One that is dear to me is the analysts... when will we be able to get an analyst?" Mr. James asked. Emmanuel responded with some uncertainty about the staffing details, but noted, to the senator's surprise, that there was someone currently volunteering in that role. "In some areas, they're actually folks in the community that are actively engaged in those sorts of functions," Emmanuel noted.

James then took the opportunity to press specifically about what the office was doing in response to the recent shooting deaths of two 16-year olds. "I want to make sure things are being done to make sure that individuals are getting comfort, because they impact those individuals that are high school level," James said.

Emmanuel's non-specific explanation about providing "wraparound services" for families in need and attempting to intervene and provide support among the victims' peer groups sparked ire from the lawmaker. "Thank you for wasting my time," said James, before threatening to introduce legislation that would dissolve the Office of Gun Violence should its leadership continue to be vague about its policies, plans, and practice.

An intense question and answer session ensued between Knight and the committee members, wherein concerns were raised regarding the absence of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the Governor's Office. Recognizing the significance of establishing KPIs, Knight acknowledged the need to address this issue adequately. Moreover, the challenges associated with managing the diverse responsibilities of the Governor's Office were thoroughly discussed.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory directed her attention to the specific budget allocation of \$75,000 designated for the Governor's Summer Reading Challenge, suggesting the exploration of alternative funding sources. Knight clarified that the program would not exhaust the entire budgeted amount on books alone. Instead, it would incorporate a virtual component, employing software to track children's reading progress and provide translations, thereby optimizing the utilization of allocated funds.

In response to inquiries about the territory's economy, Knight disclosed that the current inflation rate stood at 8.6%. Furthermore, he revealed that a living wage study was nearing completion. The committee members also probed into concerns regarding utility costs and low wages within the Governor's Office, receiving comprehensive explanations to alleviate any apprehensions.

Other topics discussed during the hearing included the state of the economy, concerns over inflation and cost-of-living. Angel Bolques Jr. raised these issues, prompting a response from Karl Knight, Chief of Staff for Governor Albert Bryan. Knight revealed that the current inflation rate stood at 8.6% and assured the committee that a living wage study was nearing completion. Bolques also questioned the low pay rate of a vacant position highlighted in a post auditor's report, amounting to approximately \$10.82 per hour. Additionally, he sought an explanation for the sudden 100% increase in utilities from 2023.

Building upon Bolques Jr.'s concerns, Senator Novelle Francis redirected the discussion to the wages of employees in the Governor's office who currently earn at or near the minimum wage. Recognizing the hardships faced by these individuals, Senator Francis inquired about potential plans to increase their salaries. Knight responded by affirming that the Governor's office was actively conducting a comprehensive review of salaries.

"We weren't able to conduct it in time for the budget call, but we're currently working with the governor to look over salaries. We are committed to adjusting salaries as it makes sense and it's prudent across the board and at the Office of the Governor as well," assured Knight.