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# Senators Criticize VITEMA Officials Over Budget and Staffing Concerns

Hurricane Season / **Published On June 21, 2023 05:57 AM /**

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## VITEMA DIRECTOR DARYL JASCHEN By. GOV'T HOUSE

In a Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance meeting held on Tuesday, V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency officials were taken to task over their budget proposal for fiscal year 2024 and related staffing issues.

VITEMA's proposed budget of \$9,944,838, marking a slight increase from the previous fiscal year, drew intense scrutiny from lawmakers. The \$9.9 million represents \$6,359,725 from the general fund, \$979,494 from the Emergency Services Fund and \$2,605,618 in federal funds, according to VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen, who outlined the planned usage of these funds with an emphasis on equipment repairs, training emergency communications center operators, and

transitioning to enhanced 911 services.

One of the VITEMA's biggest challenges, Jaschen said, was finding and retaining top talent. "VITEMA continuously recruits qualified individuals to join our team," he said, highlighting a recruitment fair held in March, which resulted in 17 offers of employment in the emergency communications centers on St. Croix and St. Thomas being made to qualified applicants. The 10 successful new hires who have already been onboarded are "thriving," according to the director, while a second cohort began work on Tuesday, June 20. Despite the update, Jaschen says that turnover in the agency is high. "Many who are new to emergency management learn the fast-paced and stressful environment is not for them," he lamented. Another reason for high attrition is the competitive recruitment environment for highly-skilled workers. "VITEMA has suffered losses of key positions within the past six months. These losses are mainly attributed to career advancement opportunities in higher pay," he said.

During questioning, Senator Angel Bolques asked about the VITEMA's staffing issues, referring to a "massive exodus" at the agency and asked whether current vacancies were a result of this. Jaschen confirmed that departures were mainly from the 911 unit but assured the committee that the agency was making strides to fill these vacancies.

Bolques then delved into the matter of salary raises for employees. In response, Merlinda Philomene, deputy director of HR and labor relations, clarified that "the 911 call center operators have received salary increases as of April of this year for going back to fiscal year 21."

A seeming decrease in requested funding amounts under various category headings also drew Bolques's attention. "I am sure my colleagues and I are not quite comfortable with the Emergency Management Agency potentially not having funds during a hurricane season," he noted, asking Jaschen about the reasoning for these deductions and whether the agency was receiving sufficient federal funds to support its operations.

Jaschen explained that the changes represented a reshuffling of the budget, and noted that VITEMA was receiving some funding from Government House to support generators and shelter repairs.

Jaschen also disclosed, in response to a question from Bolques, that the tsunami sirens are still not all functional as yet. There is repair work being done this week on St. Croix, Jaschen made known, to address the issue.

The continued lack of a meteorologist on staff at VITEMA was a source of irritation for Senator Ray Fonseca. He criticized the agency for its inability to track storms and excoriated Jaschen for indicating that the agency did not want or need a Doppler weather system. "Just one airplane landing accident at our airport... is enough justification," Fonseca argued. "Airport safety is another reason why I'm recommending the Doppler," he asserted, saying that funds are available from the Federal Aviation Administration for the purchase of such weather monitoring systems. "It's primarily used to detect hazardous wind shear conditions," Fonseca went on. Speaking about the cost of such a system, the lawmaker returned to a sore point for the legislators. "It costs a lot less than the [\\$45 million they illegally used](#) from the General Fund to pay Vitol," he pointed out.

Jaschen, however, insisted that VITEMA had robust partnerships with the National Weather Service and other entities, providing a comprehensive picture for the people of the territory. He said that Hurricane Hunter aircraft would be flying into Tropical Storm Bret on Wednesday morning to collect more data on the system. Despite the lack of local meteorologists on staff. "We have a tremendous team, both local and federal, to provide an overall picture for the people of the

territory with that purpose to save lives and protect property,” Jaschen said.

Senator Kenneth Gittens also took issue with aspects of VITEMA’s staffing makeup. He questioned why there were no new positions programmed for the Emergency Operations Center for St. John. Jaschen responded that there were currently three full-time employees from St. John, with one supervisor who has been a resident of the island for several years. Despite Gittens's expression with dismay, however, Jaschen maintained that he was satisfied by the arrangements for St. John. The senator vowed to further pursue that line of inquiry during hearings in the committee of jurisdiction.

Committee Chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory quizzed agency officials about funding, noting a reduction in federal funds expected for fiscal year 2024. Florecita Brunn, deputy director of Grants Management, confirmed this, attributing it to the exhaustion of Covid funding and a decrease in Homeland Security funding due to an influx of individuals into the territory.

Senator Frett-Gregory also spent some time delving into the distribution of monies from the Emergency Services Fund, which is divvied up between VITEMA and the VI Fire and Emergency Medical Services in a 40% to 60% ratio. She questioned the money being requested from this fund this year, pointing out the need to ensure that each entity received their correct portion, according to the 60/40 division set forth in the Emergency Services Fund.

Several senators also questioned agency officials about the distribution of exempt and non-exempt positions in existing vacancies. Philomene, VITEMA’s deputy director of HR and labor relations, clarified that many of these exempt positions were grant-funded, adding her voice to Jaschen’s that while recruitment efforts had been successful, retaining qualified employees remained a challenge.