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'Department of Hindrance Services': Senators Lambaste DHS for Lack of Efficacy and Effort in Addressing Departmental Challenges

Senate / **Published On July 26, 2023 05:57 AM /**

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Kimberly Causey-Gomez By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

“We pay for y’all to use your heads. Stop sitting on it,” said Senator Kenneth Gittens to Department of Human Services Commissioner Kimberly Causey-Gomez during Tuesday’s hearing of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance.

Causey-Gomez and several members of the DHS executive team appeared to defend the department’s fiscal year 2024 budget request of just under \$258 million, 28 percent, or \$72.3 million of which is anticipated to come from the territory’s General Fund, with the bulk of the remainder coming from federal dollars. Non-appropriated, special funds will comprise 1 percent

of the total budget, the commissioner disclosed.

Ms. Causey-Gomez noted the keen interest lawmakers have taken in the operations of her department. "Many of you have called or emailed to schedule a visit to one of our facilities where we serve our most vulnerable population," she said, thanking them for their passion. "Your continued commitment to fund the department...allows our DHS professionals to better provide social services that will enhance the quality of life for individuals and families with diverse needs in the Virgin Islands."

That passion, however, resulted in sharp and at times painful scrutiny of the department's efforts in delivering an acceptable level of service to those who need them, with senators expressing in no uncertain terms that they feel DHS is falling short.

Causey-Gomez detailed ongoing workforce shortages, with approximately 150 vacant positions the department is trying to fill. The shortage was an area of particular concern for lawmakers, with Senator Ray Fonseca emphasizing the income disparity between DHS staffers and workers in other public sector jobs as well as in the private sector, with public workers earning significantly less. He noted that there were about "50 employees in this department [earning] less than \$15 an hour."

For nursing staff, Assistant Commissioner Denelle Baptiste acknowledged that the low wages were a challenge, indicating that DHS was considering a salary hike, at least for that category of worker. Baptiste also said the department was looking into the training of existing staff.

Senator Diane Capeheart noted vacancies for posts that have to deal with Medicaid, and indicated her knowledge of individuals with Medicaid experience who want to return and fill these vacancies. Committee Chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory also said she had personal knowledge of a qualified person who has not been interviewed by the department, despite her willingness to work in that agency. She ascribed part of the hiring problem at DHS to "politics," suggesting that there was undue interference in the hiring process. "We don't have the luxury of deciding that we are not hiring people because of whatever their political affiliation is. We have a problem," the senator fretted.

Sen. Frett-Gregory was nonplussed at Deputy Commissioner for Human Resources & Labor Relations, Michael Trotman's expressed "hope" that hiring teams screening for one position would pass on the names of qualified unsuccessful candidates to be considered for other vacant positions. "You're not saying 'we have a crisis', commissioner," retorted Frett-Gregory.

The Budget Committee chair was also annoyed to learn that some federal funds had to be returned because the department did not have an approved cost allocation plan for the particular program, which related to the Children's Bureau. Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin disclosed that DHS was working to rectify the situation, and Causey-Gomez vowed to ensure that the issue was fixed before the end of the year.

Several senators, including Marvin Blyden, Franklin Johnson, and Ms. Frett-Gregory, expressed grave concerns about the danger that several federal grants would expire before the allocated funds could be utilized, and were skeptical despite the commissioner's confidence that "we will spend the majority of it," with "some that we've requested extensions for."

Causey-Gomez acknowledged delays in spending, attributing the hold-up to "several contributing factors." However, she said that DHS "continues to work with both our federal and internal

departments to resolve the issues," announcing initiatives within the Office of Fiscal Affairs to closely monitor and track federal and local spending.

Sen. Frett-Gregory also took issue with poverty levels in the territory, expressing concern that current measurements may not accurately reflect the reality, thereby impacting federal funding for DHS programs and services. Causey-Gomez told lawmakers that DHS was discussing the issue with their federal counterparts and are seeking to apply changes individually for different programs, such as SNAP and Medicaid.

The large-scale disenrollment of individuals from SNAP and MVP programs was a point of concern for Senator Novelle Francis. Ms. Baptiste, the DHS assistant commissioner, told them that after a recertification hiatus during the pandemic, the process has restarted. DHS is, she said, anticipating an increase in uncompensated care as a result. Sen. Francis called for better communication with lawmakers on the issue, noting that there may need to be legislative action to ensure that people are taken care of. "We can't just have individuals left out there to die," he said.

The problem of DHS not being able to keep up with the demand for their services was highlighted when senators disclosed that there was a waiting list for the Meals on Wheels program on St. Croix and St. Thomas, with almost 300 people territory-wide waiting to receive the service. Ms. Baptiste explained that the program needed to hire more nutritional aides, drivers, and vehicles to accommodate the increasing demand. After being informed that the cost of expanding the program would be approximately \$1.3 million, to serve mostly elderly residents in need of prepared meals, Frett-Gregory instructed DHS to address the issue with urgency. "People are hungry," she said. "You can tell the value of a community based on how they treat the elderly population."

Sen. Kenneth Gittens pointed out that meal deliveries should be expanded to holidays as well. He accused DHS officials of "shilly-shallying", or failing to execute their duties in a committed and competent manner, and generated a new, less salubrious expansion of the DHS acronym, rechristening the agency "Department of Hindrance Services" as a jab at their alleged lack of efficacy and effectiveness in program delivery.

The plight of seniors who may need assistance from DHS was also a sore point for legislators. Sen. Blyden queried the caseload of the adult protective program, learning that there were 307 and 347 in St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix respectively, with only two social workers per district. Meanwhile, Senator Dwayne DeGraff expressed frustration and concern for the under-served senior population, questioning the officials' comfort with their service delivery.

Causey-Gomez acknowledged that the department's challenges with providing adequate services to many of their clients is something that keeps her, and other members of staff, awake at night. Despite the numerous challenges raised by lawmakers and acknowledged by the DHS head, the commissioner ended her testimony on a positive note, expressing excitement for the opportunities ahead and commitment to their mission.