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V.I. Police Department Grapples with Understaffing and Skyrocketing Overtime Costs

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A V.I.P.D. Special Operations Bureau detective secures the Red Brick crime scene as other officers perform investigatory work on Tues. Dec. 28, 2021. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

ST. THOMAS — Amid a stark backdrop of mounting overtime costs and a significant understaffing crisis, V.I. Police Department Commissioner Ray Martinez faced tough questions at the 35th Legislature's Committee on Budget, Finance, and Appropriations on Friday. Mr. Martinez defended the department's fiscal year 2024 budget request of \$75.5 million, an overwhelming 98 percent of which is earmarked from the general fund.

A central issue raised by lawmakers was the whopping \$8.2 million allocated for officer overtime. Chief Financial Officer Sandra Webster compounded concerns when she revealed that the

department expects almost \$14 million in overtime reimbursements from FEMA on top of the \$8.2 million from the V.I. government's general fund.

Mr. Martinez painted a stark picture of the department's overtime dilemma, especially during festivals and events. He said, "The Cruzan Christmas festival ran us close to \$420,000 in overtime... St. John is about roughly \$160,000 and St. Thomas carnival runs us easily in excess of half a million dollars." Highlighting the critical understaffing of VIPD, he noted that each district should ideally boast 150 VIPD officers, an achievement yet to be realized.

Senator Kenneth Gittens provided the Consortium with a breakdown of the VIPD's overtime costs so far, since the beginning of the latest fiscal year in October 2023:

St. Croix (STX) District:

1. Officer (Ofcr)

- Base Pay: \$52,886
- OT-to-date: \$171,925
- Total: \$279,949

2. Corporal

- Base Pay: \$57,901
- OT-to-date: \$153,936
- Total: \$258,878

3. Sergeant (SGT)

- Base Pay: \$63,696
- OT-to-date: \$205,269
- Total: \$327,725

4. Captain (CAPT)

- Base Pay: \$76,834
- OT-to-date: \$145,779
- Total: \$276,014

St. Thomas-St. John (STT) District:

1. Sergeant (SGT)

- Base Pay: \$68,865
- OT-to-date: \$142,081
- Total: \$255,408

2. Lieutenant (1st Instance)

- Base Pay: \$73,416

- OT-to-date: \$135,718
- Total: \$259,300

3. Lieutenant (2nd Instance)

- Base Pay: \$75,219
- OT-to-Date: \$114,354
- Total: \$249,975

4. Captain (CAPT)

- Base Pay: \$80,300
- OT-to-Date: \$142,522
- Total: \$274,684

While the overtime and staffing issues took center stage, Mr. Martinez delved into other crucial areas of the department's operation:

Compliance with the 2009 Consent Decree: Over \$1.8 million has been spent on VIPD's persistent efforts to achieve compliance. Senator Donna Frett-Gregory expressed frustration over multiple government departments' adherence to various consent decrees, urging the VIPD to maintain a firm stance with the new monitoring team.

Investment in Training & Modernization: The police commissioner cited a surge in applications for police positions, emphasizing the ongoing intensive training programs. He also spotlighted the department's technological advances, mentioning their use of artificial intelligence, digital forensics, and the introduction of a real-time crime center at the St. Thomas carnival event. This technological hub played a pivotal role in gathering, analyzing, and disseminating real-time information, proving instrumental in arrests.

When quizzed by Senator Angel Bolques about the sustainability of these crime centers, Mr. Martinez noted they've budgeted around \$2 million for the initial year, but sustaining them would necessitate an estimated \$740,000-\$750,000 annually.

The session wasn't devoid of emotional moments, with several senators extending condolences for the tragic loss of Detective Delberth Phipps Jr., who valiantly died in the line of duty. Closing on a resolute note, Mr. Martinez voiced his unwavering faith in the VIPD, declaring, "We got our shortcomings, we got our faults, but this department, second to none. Trust me on that."