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# V.I.P.D. Criticized for Lack of Enforcement: 'Right Now People Feel Like Nothing is Happening'

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**Police on a crime scene on Centerline Road across from the St. Croix Central High School in September, 2015. That year, a wave of crime led to a state of emergency declaration by then-Lt. Gov. Osbert Potter. By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM**

From basic law enforcement actions such as ticket citations for illegal parking and vehicles operating without required-by-law approvals such as registration and driver's licenses, to greater initiatives such as gun amnesty programs, policing communities known to have a high level of violence and safeguarding popular hangouts such as the boardwalk in Christiansted, the Virgin Islands Police Department on Friday came under criticism from senators, a number of whom were law enforcement officers themselves.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff, who pointed to what he referred to as an upswing in gun violence in the territory, asked St. Croix Police Chief Sidney Elskoe for his plan to battle the surge. "I have a plan that has yet to be vetted so I will not put it forward at this time," the St. Croix chief, who was recently named, said during the Friday Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, Public Safety, and Veterans' Affairs hearing.

Senator Kenneth Gittens, a former law enforcement officer, spoke of V.I.P.D. enforcement personnel who have been on extended leave for up to five months, and urged department officials to put a stop to the occurrence. "Those that can return to work need to be returned to work immediately. Or they need to be out and allow for you to be able to hire new hires," Mr. Gittens said.

Mr. Gittens also criticized the department for what he said was the late release of information about crime, which he said is sometimes almost useless because the information provided is barebones. "We have individuals in the community doing a much better job in bringing out these information than the department itself, but that's not information people could rely on," the senator said.

"If we don't continue to take care of the small stuff we're going to continue having the big problems. People parking on the side walks, it got to stop. People parking right on the corner — you can't even turn down the street right by Government House in Christiansted. I mean we really got to get back to basics," he said, later adding, "people need to feel safe, and right now people feel like nothing is happening."

Responding to a question from Senator Javan James on whether the V.I.P.D. was utilizing social platforms to inform the public, Deputy Commissioner of Operations, Calvin Walwyn, said the department did not have control of some of the current social platforms.

"What we are doing is creating a new VIPD page," he said, referring to Facebook. "I'm told that the one that we have now was not ours, and we are moving from there to the new one, and that should be soon."

V.I.P.D. Commissioner Trevor Velinor was not to present for the hearing.

Senator Novelle Francis, also a former law enforcement officer, police chief and commissioner, said he had received reports of lawlessness on the boardwalk in Christiansted — from smoking, fighting and even gun transactions — which suggests that the police presence in the area is either minimal or nonexistent. "They say that after dark, the boardwalk turns into a free for all. We really need to take a look at what's happening at that boardwalk."

The department also hasn't had a gun amnesty program for years, and Mr. Francis said one is long overdue. "In 2009 we did a gun amnesty that netted us 220 guns. That year we destroyed 332 guns," Mr. Francis said.

The department said it recovered 102 in 2018 and 149 in 2019.

During the hearing, Mr. Walwyn firmly backed away from any detailed discussion on the wave of gun violence and murder in the territory, due to the "sensitive nature" of the crime investigations.

"... Due to the sensitive nature of the criminal investigations relevant to the recent rash of gun violence, I will not publicly discuss those incidents nor divulge information that will compromise the investigative efforts of the men and women that are working diligently to secure arrests and

seizures,” Mr. Walwyn said.

Mr. Walwyn said that in October 2019, the VIPD rolled out its Virgin Islands Crime Initiative (VICI). He said the force invited various law enforcement agencies to participate. He explained the VICI to be a contextualized enforcement strategy designed to identify the most violent offenders and prolific violent crime affecting Virgin Islanders.

The deputy commissioner also said that enforcing non-violent offenses — to include speeding, parking, limousine tint, and ensuring more ticket citations — would lead to more arrests.

Speaking for the future, Mr. Walwyn said the police force hopes to add public surveillance cameras to the initiatives of crimefighting. He added that their research found that cameras can also be a cost-effective means of preventing crime. Cameras are most effective when there are enough of them, and they are monitored by trained staff, concluded the Deputy Commissioner.

Committee members at Friday’s public hearing were Chairman, Senator Steven D. Payne, Dwayne M. DeGraff, Kenneth L. Gittens, Stedmann Hodge, Jr., and Novelle E. Francis, Jr. Non-Committee members were Alicia Barnes, Kurt Vialet, and Javan James, Sr.