

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Recruitment Hurdles Dominate Div. of Personnel's \$51.5M Budget Discussion

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Recruitment challenges took center stage at the 35th Legislature's Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance hearing on Tuesday, as the Division of Personnel sought a \$51.5 million appropriation. Across the government, including main departments and semi-autonomous agencies, there have been reports of recruitment difficulties, which Personnel Director Cindy Richardson corroborated in her testimony.

"Entities across government have been reporting staff shortages and recruitment challenges," Ms. Richardson stated, noting that the narrative has been a recurring theme in the fiscal year 2024 budget cycle.

Addressing these concerns, Ms. Richardson enumerated various recruitment initiatives, from attending job fairs to off-island campaigns. Notably, she highlighted the division's non-traditional approach. "We set up our recruitment stations at this year's AgriFest event on St. Croix to attract locals and tourists to GVI job opportunities."

However, lawmakers expressed concerns regarding the efforts to attract top-tier talent. Senator Kenneth Gittens questioned the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of off-island campaigns. In response, Ms. Richardson admitted that some past efforts may have been wasteful but emphasized the need for a consistent presence.

Senator Javan James Sr. underscored the importance of internal promotions, which Ms. Richardson cautioned could lead to deficits in other areas. Mr. James responded with urgency, saying, "I really want to make sure that you pay whoever is very good and hold them accountable."

Employee retention was another highlighted concern. Ms. Richardson detailed the division's training programs and opportunities, such as customer service training and the GVI Fellows Program. Yet, when Senator Donna Frett-Gregory pointed out disparities in the fellows' compensation compared to experienced coworkers, Ms. Richardson conceded that the fellowship was a recruitment tool, leading Ms. Frett-Gregory to question its effectiveness as a retention strategy.

In financial queries, Senator Novelle Francis raised questions about a \$25 million allocation for retroactive employee payment. Ms. Richardson clarified that these funds were not under her division, indicating the Department of Finance as the last agency to address it. Mr. Francis urged her to locate the exact budgetary allocation.

Mr. Gittens also inquired about streamlining the onboarding process to avoid payment delays, with Ms. Richardson attributing recent issues to the Department of Finance, not her division.

Closing her testimony, Ms. Richardson described the division's proposed budget as "a prism of opportunities for growth, redevelopment, and sustainability." However, the lawmakers' questions made it evident that their primary focus remains - ensuring the government attracts and retains the best talent for the Virgin Islands.