

Collective Bargaining Grapples with Caseload Backlog, Eyes Law Revision for Governor's Direct Wage Intervention

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The Office of Collective Bargaining has made a fervent plea to the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance for a modification in the Act 4440. The proposed change aims to empower the governor to grant general wage increments to all unionized employees even during ongoing negotiations.

Juliette Thomas, coordinator of administrative services, on Tuesday presented the agency's budget request in place of Chief Negotiator Joss Springette, who was incapacitated due to health issues. Ms. Thomas outlined that of the projected \$1.4 million budget, personnel costs form a massive 75 percent. The residual is shared among other services, capital costs, and equipment expenses.

Anticipating an addition to the compact team of 6, including a labor attorney borrowed from the Department of Justice, Ms. Thomas revealed plans to bring on board a financial specialist for St. Croix. Springette's testimony, presented by Thomas, emphasized the pressing need to recruit the Office of Collective Bargaining's dedicated attorney. She stated, "The Department of Justice is the people's attorney and should center its efforts on its own responsibilities."

The pressing demands of the sector have also signaled the necessity for further hires. Ms. Thomas mentioned the ongoing recruitment for roles like financial management officer and labor relations specialists to achieve the goal of harmonizing management-labor relations and cutting down labor disputes. As it stands, a mere 17 percent of a total of 286 cases had been successfully closed by the end of July 2023.

Chief Negotiator Springette's commentary shed light on the evolving labor relations milieu since the 1980s, pointing out the unionization of over 70 percent of the workforce currently. "Some unions have up to eight bargaining units. Some CBAs are as thick as textbooks," she remarked.

She further underscored the urgent need to modify Act 4440. Springette believed that the inability to grant wage hikes during negotiations would result in several employees waiting for years before finalized negotiations.

Senator Kenneth Gittens broached the subject of transitioning towards a market-driven pay structure rather than union-based wages. Responding, Ms. Thomas emphasized that while negotiations were inevitable, the proposed Act 4440 amendment would at least allow for annual wage hikes without negotiations.

Ms. Thomas, answering Senator Novelle Francis's query on the Steelworkers Supervisors Union's collective bargaining agreement timeline, mentioned a hopeful deadline of September, although nothing was concrete.

The session concluded without a clear stance from lawmakers regarding the Office's suggestion for Act 4440. Yet, Ms. Thomas reiterated the importance of the change in her concluding remarks.