

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Unresolved Premium Pay and Bovoni Landfill Fire Suppression Dominate VIFEMS Budget Hearing

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During Friday's budget hearing, Fire and Emergency Management (VIFEMS) officials faced pointed questions from lawmakers, especially concerning the delayed Premium Pay for firefighters and ongoing fire mitigation efforts at Bovoni landfill.

Committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory expressed exasperation over the delay in Premium Pay allotments. "Give the people their money. I don't understand what takes us so long," she declared, addressing the Office of Management and Budget.

Director Daryl George of VIFEMS provided insights into the constant challenges at the Bovoni landfill, where fire suppression remains a regular issue. "Almost every day, every

week, we go on that landfill because you have the garbage burning, and then sometimes you have the cars burning," he explained. Highlighting a potential solution, Mr. George proposed utilizing water from the Waste Management Authority's treatment plant to combat the persistent fires. Ms. Frett-Gregory, resonating with this sentiment, urged him to be more proactive and seek legislative support if necessary.

On the budget front, the proposed figures for the fiscal year 2024 primarily consist of general fund appropriations, enhanced by federal awards. A striking 97% of these funds are earmarked for personnel costs. Senator Samuel Carrion voiced concerns over such a heavy allocation.

In defense, Mr. George outlined various revenue-generation initiatives undertaken by VIFEMS, including the deployment of an online portal and actively pursuing community grants. "Most of the businesses...the fees they're paying include a lot of late fees... so we rely on that funding for operational costs," the director clarified.

He also emphasized VIFEMS' commitment to training and ongoing development. Two staffers are currently undergoing off-island training through a unique public-private partnership, which has generated concerns from some senators. Addressing these, Assistant EMS Director Lisle Evelyn clarified, "The training is fully funded by private entities. So there is no cost at all to GVI." This initiative was facilitated by the collaboration with Love City Strong, the Bloomberg Group, and the Howard County, Baltimore EMS program.

However, a significant concern remains for certain EMS officers in the territory facing potential termination due to their persistent failure to attain certification. From the initial cohort of 21 officers in 2019, seven have yet to be certified. Mr. George expressed his frustration to the committee, stating, "The more we try to help, is the more we get some pushback. We will have to start the process of terminating." Sen. Frett-Gregory responded affirmatively, asserting the need to maintain standards.

Concluding the hearing, despite the hurdles and challenges raised, both lawmakers and Mr. George united in their acknowledgment of VIFEMS' pivotal role in the territory.