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VIPA Not Immune From Human Resources Strain, Dowe Tells Lawmakers

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VIPA Exec. Director Carlton Dowe.

This year's series of hearings before the Senate Committee on Finance, Appropriations and Budget has thrown into stark relief the inability of the government service and affiliated entities to maintain a workforce sufficient to its needs. [Understaffing](#) across [departments](#) and divisions has been a theme in the testimony provided to legislators by agency heads.

The V.I. Port Authority is no exception, with Executive Director Carlton Dowe testifying before lawmakers on Monday that the agency's human resource staff has been "challenged in recruiting and retaining professional engineers, law enforcement officers and firefighters," despite regular advertisements in local news outlets and online employment platforms. Additional recruitment

efforts stretched to posters and the airport, social media blasts, radio talk shows, job fairs, and the offer of competitive incentive packages.

Senator Franklin Johnson questioned whether staff who currently occupy temporary positions at VIPA could apply for existing vacancies. Mr. Dowe said that the agency encourages the practice, however he noted that many of the vacancies that currently exist require a specialized skill set, whether in policing, fire engineering, or airport operations. “So it’s not so much about the vacancy; it’s being able to have the requisite people with qualifications or certifications to go into those jobs,” said the executive director.

Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger asked whether on-the-job training could be available, to which Mr. Dowe again explained that while there is some level of internal hiring that takes place, the bulk of the vacancies required technical proficiency of the sort that could not be acquired through learning on the job. “I can’t take the shuttle driver now and put them in engineering,” he noted as an example.

VIPA currently has a total of 345 permanent and temporary employees across the territory; 111 on St. Croix and 234 on St. Thomas and St. John. For their services, the agency expects to pay \$ 40.7 million in salaries. When taxes and benefits are figured in, VIPA expects to spend a total of 49% of its expense budget on personnel costs. Union agreements are mostly current, with Mr. Dowe sharing that negotiations with the United Steelworkers Collective began August 21.