

Lawmakers Approve Fund Transfers for VITEMA, FEMS to Buy Supplies, Pay Vendors

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Sandbags used to protect against flooding during storms.

The V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency and the V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Services (FEMS) will now have the money they need to conduct crucial aspects of their operations, as transfer requests for the two entities were approved by the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance on Monday.

For fiscal year 2023, FEMS was allocated over \$33.7 million, with over \$32.5 million of that amount being used to meet operational needs. The agency has requested a transfer of \$300,000 from the "other services and charges" budget category to the "capital outlay" category, in order to pay outstanding invoices from vendors, one of whom is owed \$168,000 for the sale of self-

contained breathing apparatus, according to FEMS Director Daryl George. Asked how the equipment had arrived without a purchase order, Mr. George explained that it was an accidental shipment of the vendor.

Mr. George initially wanted the balance of the money to go towards building an office space, but when lawmakers learned of another vendor with outstanding invoices, they had other plans. “If we are going to clean up our debt, and if there’s additional resources on paper...why are we not giving consideration to at least paying a portion of what is outstanding to Pafford?” she asked. OMB Director Jenifer O’Neal suggested that FEMS amend their request to use funding to pay off Pafford.

VITEMA, meanwhile, needed to correct an erroneous appropriation to the “other services and charges” category instead of the “supplies” category, when the 34th Legislature approved a \$100,000 disbursement to allow the agency to procure hurricane preparation supplies. “VITEMA definitely wants to have sand and sandbags available for the islands of St. Croix, St. John and Water Island and for St. Thomas to make sure we cover all four islands,” said VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen. He noted that the existing stock of empty sandbags that were deployed during hurricanes Irma and Maria are “basically falling apart,” necessitating the purchase of new ones. According to Mr. Jaschen, 120,000 tonnes of locally-sourced sand will fill the 50,000 bags that will be purchased.

Associate Director of Budget Operations at OMB, Kimika Woods, told lawmakers that OMB supports both transfer requests as both agencies provide emergency services to the people of the territory. Ms. Woods also indicated that OMB has reviewed both requests to ensure that the funds are available within the budgets of both agencies.

Ultimately, lawmakers voted to approve both transfer requests with all senators present in the chamber voting in the affirmative.