



GOVERNMENT OF
THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VIRGIN ISLANDS FIRE SERVICE
“Providing Safety, Service and Satisfaction”



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**Testimony on the Virgin Islands Fire Service’s Fiscal Year 2017 Budget
Committee on Finance
June 16, 2016**

Good morning Honorable Senators of the 31st Legislature, Chairman of the Committee on Finance Honorable Senator Clifford Graham, other senators present, colleagues, and the listening and viewing audience.

My name is Clifford Joseph, Sr., Director of the Virgin Islands Fire Service. With me today are Larry Johnson, Fire Chief- St. Croix District, Oral Wheatley, Fire Chief-St. Thomas District, Gregory Williams, Deputy Chief- St. Croix, Leonard Fabian, Deputy Chief-St. Thomas, Antonio Stevens, Deputy Chief of Training, and Charmaine Akers-Hewlett, Director of Administrative and Business Affairs. Also with me are St. Thomas Fire Marshal Leon Battiste and St. Croix Fire Marshal Johnny Frontal.

The Virgin Islands Fire Service was established within the Office of the Governor on January 1, 1979 through Act No. 4206. The agency is charged with providing 24-hour emergency first response service to the entire Territory. There are ten (10) fire facilities with two (2) administrative offices.

The agency has three (3) main areas of operations: Emergency Operations (Suppression), Arson Investigation and Prevention (Prevention), and Administration.

The Suppression Unit serves as first responders in fire, basic medical response and/or other hazardous incidents. This unit is tasked with the control and suppression of fire outbreaks on public or private properties.

The Prevention Unit investigates fire outbreaks, conducts fire safety inspections of existing structures and analyzes the construction documents of proposed structures to ensure compliance with the relevant fire codes. The Unit also provides public education, fire safety training and prevention methods, and hazard mitigation. The goal of the Prevention Unit is to safeguard the community from fires and other

related hazards through programs, which will educate the public and enhance observance of fire regulations.

The Administration Unit, through management of the available financial resources, provides the support for efficient operations of the Prevention and Suppression units.

Through public education, rapid response, inspection and the elimination of fire hazards, the Virgin Islands Fire Service fulfills its mission to protect life and property. The strategic goal of the agency is to provide the highest level of service and protection to the citizens of the Virgin Islands.

Our General Fund appropriation for FY 2016 is \$18,209,055. Of this amount, ninety-seven percent (97%) is dedicated to personnel costs and the other three percent (3%) is for mandatory costs, which include rent, utilities and travel. Other expenditures such as operating, office and vehicle supplies, communications, professional services, repair and maintenance are paid for with funds from the Emergency Services Special Funds (which are the fees collected from telephone/cell phone surcharge) and the Fire Service Emergency Fund (fees/collections related to inspections). Grant funds are used to cover training and associated training costs.

Projects:

The Fire Service has undertaken several projects to improve infrastructure territory-wide, including the construction of a new facility in the St. Thomas/ St. John District to relocate the Fort Christian Fire Station.

St. Thomas/St. John

The project to relocate the Fort Christian Fire Station (Hotel Company Fire Station Project) from its current location to #100 Taarneberg is in the initial phase. It has been contracted out and construction has begun. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the funding will be provided by the Office of Federal Highway Safety with the Fire Service responsible for the remaining twenty-eight percent (28%).



St. Croix

In the St. Croix District, the following renovations were made:

- Hurricane shutters were installed at the Emile Henderson Sr. Fire Station in Frederiksted through funding FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant
- The roof on the Rencelair I. Gibbs Fire Station in Cotton Valley was replaced with funds from FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant
- Roll-up doors were installed in the Emile Henderson Sr. Fire Station in Frederiksted through funding from FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant
- Motors for the bay doors at the Herbert L. Canegata Fire Station in Richmond were installed.

Accomplishments:

The Virgin Islands Fire Service continues to work diligently to perform its mission and has made great strides in improving the operational efficiency of the agency.

Some recent accomplishments for the Service are:

- Graduated twenty-eight (28) new firefighters- thirteen (13) on St. Thomas and fifteen (15) on St. Croix
- Hired two (2) Emergency Vehicle Technicians and two (2) assistants, one each in both districts, for the maintenance of our emergency apparatus and other vehicles
- Reduced rental costs by relocating the Administrative Office on St. Thomas from Crown Bay to Wheatley Shopping center
- Trained all Suppression Unit personnel in Ground Tactics and Fire Control
- Trained the fire personnel in Advanced Vehicle Extrication
- Completed annual physicals for the fire personnel
- Purchased and received computers for the entire Fire Service to replace the computer system that is over ten (10) years old
- Purchased hand held radios for the Fire Service that can be safely used in the WAPA plant and other hazardous situations as they do not produce static electricity
- Reestablished the Junior Firefighter program on St. Croix

- Ongoing construction of the new Hotel Company Project. This facility will be a state of the art fire station that meets the prevailing standards and will be located #100 Taarneberg.
- Applied for two (2) hazard mitigation grants from FEMA for the purchase of hurricane shutters, rollup doors and a generator for each of two stations in the St. Thomas/St. John District- the Tutu fire station and the Cruz Bay fire station.
- Applied for a \$80,000 grant from the USDA Forest Service (approval pending)
- Applied for a SAFER grant to fund the hiring of twenty (20) firefighters
- Applied for an AFG-grant for the purchase of firefighting gear, supplies and equipment

Challenges:

In spite of our recent accomplishments, the Fire Service is currently facing a number of challenges.

Grove Place-St. Croix

In the St. Croix District, the mid-island area is in need of a new fire station to replace the Grove Place station, which still has many challenges. We are considering relocating this station to 20C Upper Bethlehem to support the mid-island area. Although smaller, the station would be similar in design to the new Hotel Company on St. Thomas. In the interim, to mitigate some of the issues at the Grove Place fire station, minor repairs, painting, security cameras, and fencing have been installed.

Coral Bay-St. John

The Coral Bay fire station in St. John is facing issues associated with sinking caused by its close proximity to a natural gut. The only solution to this issue is to construct a new facility at another location. We are in the initial stages of relocating this station to Carolina 6-4 Coral Bay QTR.

Richmond Fire Station-St. Croix

The Richmond fire station, located at #16 Penitentiary Land, is presently in close proximity to WAPA and the newly installed propane tanks. This fire station needs to be relocated to a location further away to be better able to respond should an

emergency arise; its current location is not ideal. We are considering building a new facility at Plot #183 Anna's Hope to house the fire station and the offices for the Administrative Staff and the Arson Investigation and Prevention Unit. This facility would be an exact duplicate of the Hotel Company fire station currently being constructed on St. Thomas.

Manpower

The Fire Service is grateful for the twenty-eight (28) firefighters that were hired in January. These new hires have partially replaced the seventy (70) employees the Fire Service lost in the last nine (9) years and have helped to prevent station closures due to lack of personnel. We have requested an additional twenty-three (23) firefighters (twelve (12) in the St. Thomas/St. John District and eleven (11) in the St. Croix District) to augment our current staffing levels. Over three hundred (300) applicants took the written test, and we now have eligibility lists in each district. The hiring process has begun and agility testing was conducted from Monday, June 13 to Wednesday, June 15 on St. Croix and will be conducted on St. Thomas from Tuesday, June 21 to Thursday, June 24. There are presently forty-nine (49) fire personnel eligible to retire- nineteen (19) in the St. Thomas/St. John District and thirty (30) in the St. Croix District. If these fire personnel retire, additional undue hardship will be placed on the Service and we will result in the Service incurring overtime to meet minimum personnel safety levels.

Overtime

In an effort to reduce overtime, the Service implemented a few cost saving measures such as reassigning the amount of firefighters per station. This along with the newly hired firefighters allowed us to see a drastic reduction in overtime as compared to the same time period last fiscal year. In Fiscal Year 2015, October to May overtime exceeded \$1.6 million and this fiscal year for the same time period overtime is \$910,605. However, any decrease in fire personnel, whether due to retirement, resignation or sick, annual, military or training leave, will impact overtime costs.

HazMat Operations

As the only hazard mitigating agency in the Territory, it is vital that the HazMat Team be able to effectively respond to hazardous incidents. The Survey section of the HazMat team is an 8-member team that conducts the initial assessment to determine the presence and extent of Chemical Biological Radiation and Nuclear (CBRN) contamination. Currently, the only instrument we have to conduct these

operations is a Multi-Rae (5 gas meters). Funds are desperately needed to purchase two HazMatID 360. This piece of equipment is the most widely used chemical identifier world-wide. The HazMatID 360 is capable of identifying more than 32,000 solids, liquids, and gels in less than a minute including unknown powders, explosives, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and Toxic Industrial Chemicals (TICs). Having this piece of equipment in each district would greatly enhance the capabilities of our HazMat teams. When used in conjunction with the Multi-Rae we would be able to detect, mitigate and render the appropriate steps to keep our community safe in a timelier and more effective manner.

As has been mentioned in previous testimonies, the Fire Service inherited hazmat responsibilities for the entire Territory from the Department of Planning and Natural Resources under Executive Order No. 304-1997 in 2006. Presently, all costs associated with this mandate are being absorbed by funds collected in our Emergency accounts. Funds in these accounts cannot sustain the costs associated with the equipment needed in addition to the general operating expenses of the Fire Service.

Other Matters:

Other matters the Fire Service has been working on include the merger with the Department of Health's Emergency Medical Services Division and fire hydrants.

Merger with EMS

The Department of Health and the VI Fire Service, continue to operate under the existing Memorandum of Understanding as the Fire/EMS merger is presently being worked on. In preparation for the merger, EMT training for firefighters will commence shortly.

Fire Hydrants

As it pertains to fire hydrants, we have been working with the Water Department of the Water and Power Authority and they have provided us with a list of all the working fire hydrants throughout the Territory. There are currently only four (4) working fire hydrants in Frederiksted town and in the Christiansted town area there are twenty-five (25) working fire hydrants. In recent conversation with the Authority, we were informed that the old salt water lines feeding the other hydrants in the Frederiksted town area were experiencing leaks causing massive water loss once they were pressurized on the potable water system. As a result, these lines had to

be abandoned and the Water Department is in the process of installing new hydrants on the existing pressurized lines.

Recognizing the importance of our first responders, we feel confident that the Administration, in collaboration with the 31st Legislature, will do everything within their power to ensure that these responders are properly equipped to carry out their mission of saving life and property.

In closing, I want to thank you for allowing us to represent the Fire Service at this Budget Hearing. I must commend the members of the Virgin Islands Fire Service for their hard work and dedication to our mission. I must also thank my Management team for diligently working together as a team to resolve issues as they arise and for operating the Virgin Islands Fire Service as a professional agency.

