

**VIRGIN ISLANDS FIRE AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES
TESTIMONY**



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY, JUSTICE, AND PUBLIC SAFETY

35th LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

February 7, 2023

Presented By: Daryl A. George, Sr., Director

Good day Honorable Chairman Kenneth Gittens, other distinguished members of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety, and the listening and viewing audience.

I am Daryl A. George, Director of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services (VIFEMS). Accompanying me today in the chambers are Assistant Director of EMS Lisle Evelyn and Director of HR/Payroll Barbara Williams-Brown. Joining me virtually are Assistant Director of Fire Antonio Stevens, Medical Director Robin Ellett, St. Croix Fire Chief Klebert Titus, St. Thomas/St. John Fire Chief Clarence Stephenson, St. Thomas EMS Chief Victor Adams, St. Croix EMS Chief Robert Bryan, St. Thomas Deputy Chief Eustace Grant Jr., St. Croix Deputy Chief Paul Christian, St. John Deputy Chief Magabe Calixte, and Chief Financial Officer Charmaine Hewlett.

Assistant Director Evelyn and I will provide testimony. All other members of the executive team will be available for questions.

My testimony today will provide a broad overview of the operations and initiatives of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services. In his testimony, Assistant Director Evelyn will discuss the EMS integration and operations.

Agency Overview

VIFEMS is an all-hazard first responder agency and the primary public provider of fire and emergency medical services in the Territory.

It is organized into four units: the Suppression Unit, the Emergency Medical Services Unit (EMS Unit), the Arson Investigation and Prevention Unit (Prevention Unit), and the Administrative Unit.

The Suppression Unit responds to fires, hazardous material incidents, motor vehicle accidents, and other emergencies and consists of single and dual-role Firefighters.

The EMS Unit provides medical responses and consists of single-role emergency medical providers, including Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), Advanced Emergency Medical Technicians (AEMTs), and Paramedics.

The Prevention Unit investigates fires, educates the public on fire prevention, and enforces fire and life safety codes.

The Administrative Unit provides support to the other three units and performs administrative functions such as financial management, human resources, and procurement.

VIFEMS operates 10 stations. Each station houses fire personnel and equipment and has the capability to respond to fires and other non-medical emergencies. Five stations house EMS personnel and resources and function as bases for both fire and EMS. There are additional EMS bases at the Morris DeCastro Clinic on St. John and Estate Cottage on St. Croix.

Operations

The discussion of the agency's operations and initiatives will focus on the following key operational areas: recruitment and training, equipment and vehicles, and infrastructure.

In each of these areas, we have established and worked towards strategic goals that enhance the agency's response capabilities and improve the service provided to the community.

Recruitment and Training

Recruitment

Recognizing that staffing is essential to effective operations, VIFEMS has continued to prioritize hiring. Through the execution of a strategic staffing plan, 67 fire personnel have been hired and trained since 2019.

Since the creation of the EMS Unit, a similar strategy has been employed to address long-term EMS staffing shortages. Thus far, four EMT vacancies have been filled. Interviews have been held with several applicants for Paramedic positions, however, none of the selected candidates have accepted employment offers.

Filling critical EMS positions continues to be a challenge due to a nation-wide shortage of providers. However, we are actively working to improve recruitment efforts and have been in communication with the Division of Personnel about how best to do so.

Efforts to fill other key positions have been successful, and in the last year we have expanded our Fleet Maintenance Division to include an additional mechanic in each

district. The Coxswain position has also been filled, increasing staffing for the EMS vessel, the Star of Life.

This year's major staffing goals include hiring 10 Firefighter/EMTs in each district, filling critical EMS vacancies, and expanding the Prevention Unit.

Training

In addition to hiring, training continues to be a priority. Trainings provided in the last year include technical rescue training, a fire cause and origin class, an emergency vehicle operations course, and a plans review class.

While the agency has worked to increase the number and frequency of trainings in various disciplines, there has been a particular emphasis on EMS training.

EMR and EMT training for current fire personnel has been ongoing, and the number of dual-role EMS providers has been increasing. A total of 13 firefighters have earned National Registry Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) certification in the last year, and 4 EMR-certified personnel are in the process of completing Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) training.

The agency is currently in discussions with educational partners regarding paramedic programs, and it is anticipated that 12 VIFEMS EMTs will begin paramedic training this year.

Vehicles and Equipment

Vehicles

A major initiative for VIFEMS has been the upgrade and expansion of its fleet of emergency response vehicles. With grant funding from the Department of Interior and monies appropriated by this body, VIFEMS has procured and/or placed into service 11 emergency response vehicles in the last year. They are as follows:

- 2 Rescue Vehicles (one per district)
- 4 Quick Response Vehicles (two per district)
- 3 Tankers (one for the islands of St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix)
- 2 Pumpers (one per district)

Further expansion of the ground fleet is expected this year. Using appropriated funds, two small pumpers will be purchased for the island of St. John. Seven new

ambulances will also be procured with \$1.8 million earmarked in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023.

VIFEMS will continue to seek grant funding for the purchase of additional emergency response vehicles.

Firefighting Vessel

In the last year, the agency has made significant progress with the acquisition of a response vessel. Funding appropriated by this body was used to procure a 40-foot firefighting and rescue vessel, which is currently under construction.

Equipment

In addition to vehicles, VIFEMS has been procuring critical equipment such as self-contained breathing apparatus, rescue tools, and a cascade system with grant funding. The agency will continue to aggressively pursue funding for the purchase of additional equipment.

Infrastructure

As previously mentioned, VIFEMS operates 10 stations territory-wide.

Each station sustained damage from the 2017 hurricanes, and VIFEMS is continuously working with disaster recovery partners to secure funding for or to complete projects for the repair, hardening, or replacement of the stations.

The **Charles A. Seales Fire Station (Grove Place Fire Station)** will be replaced under the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. Plans for the new facility have been completed, and the project is currently in the demolition and excavation phase. Demolition work is expected to begin shortly.

The **Renceliar I. Gibbs Fire Station (Cotton Valley Fire Station)** will be replaced with funding from FEMA's Public Assistance program, and the architectural and engineering phase of the project has begun.

The repair and hardening of the **Emile Berry Fire Station (Dorothea Fire Station)** began last month and will be completed this year. The project is funded by FEMA's Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation grant programs.

There is a pending application for the replacement and possible relocation of the **Herbert L. Canegata Fire Station (Richmond Fire Station)**, and VIFEMS is awaiting a decision from FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. If the replacement is not approved, the station will be repaired and hardened with funding from the Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation programs.

The **Emile Henderson Sr. Fire Station (Frederiksted Fire Station)** will be repaired and hardened with funding from FEMA's Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation grant programs. The Hazard Mitigation project is currently in the architectural and engineering phase.

The **Omar Brown Sr. Fire Station (Hotel Company)** will be repaired with funding from FEMA's Public Assistance program. Construction services are currently being solicited.

The **George P. Scott Maintenance Building (Tutu Maintenance)** will also be repaired with funding from FEMA's Public Assistance program. The project is in the solicitation phase.

The **Robert O'Connor Fire Station (Cruz Bay Fire Station)**, **George P. Scott Fire Station (Tutu Fire Station)**, and **Fortuna Fire Station** are slated to be replaced under FEMA's Public Assistance program. All three projects are in the project development phase.

Repairs have been made to the **Coral Bay Fire Station** and minor mitigation remains. VIFEMS will seek a time extension from FEMA for the completion of the mitigation.

Closing

This concludes my testimony today. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Assistant Director Evelyn will now provide testimony.