

**Confirmation Hearing of Antonio O. Stevens,
Director Nominee of the
Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services**



**COMMITTEE ON RULES AND JUDICIARY
35th LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS**

March 20, 2024

Good day Honorable Senator Diane Capehart, Chairperson of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, other Honorable Committee Members, Non-Committee Members present, the dedicated professionals of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services, the listening and viewing audience, and the community which we serve.

INTRODUCTION

My name is Antonio O. Stevens, and I humbly stand before you as the Director Nominee of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services (VIFEMS). It is an honor to have been nominated to lead this time-honored agency. If confirmed, I look forward to working collaboratively with the Legislature not only on issues that affect the Fire and Emergency Medical Services (FEMS), but also on matters that support the GVI and the community.

I would first like to thank the Creator for through Him all things are possible, and it is His guidance and strength that has sustained me throughout. I also wish to thank the Honorable Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. and the Honorable Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach Esq., for their confidence in my abilities to lead this agency. Standing on the shoulders of those before me, Daryl A. George Sr., Clifford Joseph Sr., Steve Brow, Victor Brown, and Milton Potter, I look forward to building on the rich legacy of service and professional excellence established within the agency.

For those who may not know me, I am a decorated military veteran, dedicated public servant, and proud Virgin Islander. I was born on St. Croix, to Alpha O. Stevens (deceased) and Lucina Stevens. My early education began at Pearl B. Larsen Elementary School, continued at Charles H. Emmanuel Elementary School, and concluded at the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School. A true product of the Virgin Islands public school system, I went on to attend the Arthur A. Richards Jr. High School and St. Croix Central High School.

Upon completing high school, I joined the U.S. Army where I served honorably, representing my family and these Virgin Islands for 22 years. Over the course of my military career, I held various

roles. As a Drill Sergeant, I successfully trained over 3,000 recruits over a 3 year-period. While assigned as a Platoon Sergeant during Operation Iraqi Freedom, I built my platoon into a cohesive and improved unit, which contributed to the overall success of the Battalion during combat operations. For these efforts, I was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for Exceptionally Meritorious Achievement. During my time in the military, I also earned two Meritorious Service Medals.

After numerous deployments and travels across the world, I chose to return home. The sense of community, the connection to the people and my desire to serve were the driving forces for my return. Memories of the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo remained with me and fueled my commitment to serve the territory. In 1989, when the hurricane hit, I was stationed in Germany and could not return to assist. Months later, I was granted leave for two weeks and traveled home. What I witnessed deeply saddened me and created a sense of duty to my community that remains with me today.

After retiring from the military and returning home, I joined the Virgin Islands Fire Service in hopes that the leadership qualities, experiences, and skills I had developed would enable me to be an asset to the agency. At that time, I also decided to complete my post-secondary education, earning an Associate of Science in Criminal Justice and then a Bachelor of Science with honors in Emergency Management and Homeland Security. In addition to my degrees, I hold certifications or have been trained in the areas of structural collapse and urban search and rescue, technical rescue incidents, weapons of mass destruction and radiological/nuclear awareness and technical response, hazard assessment and response management, incident response to terrorist bombings, prevention and response to suicide bombings, and development of state and regional CBRNE task forces.

As in the military, I have held various roles in VIFEMS. I began my career as a Firefighter in the Suppression Unit before transferring to the Arson Prevention and Investigation Unit (Prevention Unit). As a Firefighter, I earned Employee of the Year within three years of joining the agency.

After transferring to the Prevention Unit, I served as a Deputy Inspector II (Corporal) and then a Deputy Inspector I (Sergeant).

In 2015, I was appointed to the position of Deputy Fire Chief of Training, where my responsibilities included planning, organizing, and executing training required for efficient responses to fires and other hazards. In this role, I implemented the first live structural fire training in the territory, oversaw the training of 60 fire recruits in 2016 and 2017, and introduced new tactics, techniques, and procedures to the territory's firefighters.

From 2019 until the untimely and unfortunate passing of Director Daryl A. George, Sr. in 2023, I served as the Assistant Director of Fire. In this position, I established expectations, plans, and priorities for fire operations with a focus on operational improvements, assisted with the development and implementation of policies and procedures, and worked closely with the Chief Financial Officer to procure necessary equipment and supplies with local funding and grant awards. As the Assistant Director, I had the opportunity to gain familiarity with key managerial functions and processes such as budgeting and human resources.

In addition to the formal positions I have held, I have also served as the Territorial Hazardous Material/ Weapons of Mass Destruction Coordinator since 2009 and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) Operations Section Chief at the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) since 2012.

In my role as the HazMat/WMD Coordinator, I oversee the operations of VIFEMS' HazMat teams in each district, ensuring they have the equipment and training needed to perform their duties. I also coordinate and direct operational plans with other critical support agencies such as the Virgin Islands National Guard 23rd Civil Support Team, VITEMA, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), and Homeland Security.

As the EOC Section Chief, I manage and coordinate all EOC-related operational functions during emergencies, ensuring that appropriate staffing is available and that the operating objectives and assignments identified in the Incident Action Plan are conducted efficiently. I have served in this role during three of the most significant events in the territory in the last several years: Hurricane Irma, Hurricane Maria, and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

My education and extensive public service experience in the military and the field of emergency response have prepared me for the duties and responsibilities required of the Director of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services.

AGENCY BACKGROUND AND DIRECTOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES

VIFEMS is an all-hazards, first responder agency legally responsible for the following:

- 1) enforcing the laws and regulations as they pertain to fire services and emergency medical services in the Virgin Islands,
- 2) providing effective fire prevention, fire protection, fire suppression and special operations,
- 3) preventing and reducing the risk of fire through public education, fire safety code inspections and enforcement,
- 4) providing emergency and non-emergency basic and advanced life support services,
- 5) conducting arson investigations, and
- 6) establishing and participating in training and certification, professional development, and educational programs relating to fire science, EMS and other related matters

The agency is divided into four units: the Suppression Unit, the Arson Prevention and Investigation Unit, the Emergency Medical Services Unit, and the Administrative Unit.

The Suppression Unit responds to fires, medical emergencies, hazardous materials incidents and incidents requiring technical rescue.

The EMS Unit provides pre-hospital and non-emergency medical care.

The Arson Prevention and Investigation Unit conducts fire investigations, enforces fire and life-safety codes, and educates the public on fire prevention.

The Administrative Unit provides support to the other units and performs critical administrative functions.

Per Virgin Islands Code Title 23, Chapter 7, “all responsibility for the direction and control of VIFEMS rests with the Director.” He or she is legally tasked with ensuring the discipline, good, order and proper conduct of FEMS, enforcing related laws and regulations, and the care of VIFEMS property. Other functions of the Director, as established by the Virgin Islands Code, include preparing and issuing rules and regulations necessary for efficient operations, keeping a record of all fires, preparing and issuing rules regarding fire drills and the protection of fire apparatus, and instituting a training program.

INTERIM ACTIONS

With these responsibilities in mind, I conducted an assessment of the agency’s employees and infrastructure on all four islands during my tenure as Acting Director and Director Nominee.

I engaged with agency staff and encouraged increased professionalism in the execution of their duties and their conduct. It is my belief that professionalism starts at the top, and it must be supported by the actions of all leaders.

I also held meetings with the supervisors’ unions and the supervisors to hear and address their concerns and to identify how I can best support them.

Recognizing the importance of technology, I also assessed our online presence and overall use of digital platforms and identified areas of improvement.

GOALS

If confirmed, I intend to focus the agency's efforts on meeting mandates and short-term and long-term operational goals.

SHORT-TERM GOALS

1. Hire EMTs and Paramedics

As we continue the build out of an integrated fire and emergency medical services, we have seen success with firefighters becoming EMTs and EMRs. However, we must continue to increase the number of single and dual-role EMS providers to ensure VIFEMS remains an all-hazards agency with the capacity to manage complex emergencies and up surges. This is necessary not only to better serve our community with the best pre-hospital care but to also wean ourselves off the dependency of Pafford's services.

To do so, VIFEMS intends to hire six Paramedics and 10 new Firefighter/EMTs per district.

We have already begun the process of filling the Paramedic vacancies. However, given the national shortage of paramedics, we recognize that a more aggressive and competitive approach is necessary to attract and hire qualified candidates.

The process of hiring 10 Firefighter/EMTs is slated to begin later this year.

2. Improve Customer Service

VIFEMS must have a renewed focus on effective customer service. We will aim to provide improved service not only to the customers that come into our business office but to everyone we encounter – be it a patient, someone that just lost their home, or a chance encounter.

3. Utilize Technology More Effectively

To better meet the needs of our customers, we will work to upgrade our website to accept online payments and better inform the public of the procedures for applying for inspections and permits.

We will also work to improve operational efficiency through the adoption of online platforms for training, report writing, and managing processes.

LONG TERM GOALS

1. Improve Morale

Our employees are truly our most important resource, and I firmly believe that improving our infrastructure would significantly improve employee morale and the mental well-being of our employees.

To that end, we will continue to work with our disaster recovery partners to complete FEMA-funded capital projects expeditiously.

We will also continue to keep the lines of communication between management and our personnel and union representatives open. To do so, we will maintain an open door policy and schedule regular meetings such as Labor Management Committee meetings where employees feel free to voice their concerns.

2. Increase Collections

To ensure our operations are sufficiently funded, we will continue to seek ways to increase our revenues through collections. Our agency is responsible for conducting fire safety inspections for all businesses throughout the territory. While most businesses comply there is a significant percentage that do not. We will encourage these businesses to become compliant not only for the purpose of revenue collection but also for the safety of the greater community.

3. Enhance Training Capabilities

Training is critical to VIFEMS operations and essential to increasing the number of Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) employed by the agency. Efforts to train single-role Firefighters to become EMTs have proven successful, and we would like to see this trend continued. However, we do not presently have the capability to provide EMS training in-house and must contract with another entity to provide EMT training to fire recruits and existing Firefighters. As we work to build out our training cadre, we will be focusing on developing the capability to provide in-house EMT training.

CONCLUSION

The Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services is an integral part of this community. While I say with pride, we are the Swiss Army Knife of the GVI and the Community, I am also humbled by it. As a person who has dedicated myself to public service, I promise to lead the men and women of this agency with dignity and pride. As Director, I pledge to be fair to all under my care. My approach is and will continue to be that of a team approach. Leaders will be allowed to lead, and the voices of all employees will be listened to and respected.

Before concluding my testimony, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the brave men and women of VIFEMS for their continued support. To those who believed in me, thank you. To my family, friends, and well-wishers, I am honored to have your love and encouragement. Thank you. To my Masonic Family, the VIFS Class of 2006 in both districts, and Cabinet members, thank you for your support. Please forgive me if I inadvertently omitted anyone, as my appreciation extends widely.

Again thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering any concerns or questions you may have.