

Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services

Committee on Homeland Security, Public Safety and Justice

36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands



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Presented By: Antonio Stevens, Director

Good morning, Honorable Senator Clifford A. Joseph, Sr., Chair of the Committee on Homeland Security, Public Safety and Justice, other esteemed Committee members, and the listening and viewing audience.

I am Antonio Stevens, Director of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services. Accompanying me are executive team members Lisle Evelyn, Assistant Director of EMS, Clarence Stephenson, Assistant Director of Fire, Dr. Robin Ellett, Medical Director, Charmaine Akers-Hewlett, Chief Financial Officer, Barbara Williams-Brown, Director of HR and Payroll, Klebert Titus, St. Croix Fire Chief, Eustace Grant Jr., St. Thomas-St. John Fire Chief, and Robert Bryan, St. Croix EMS Chief.

We are pleased to appear before you to provide an update on the operations of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services.

The testimony today will focus on the following key aspects of operations: staffing, vehicles and equipment, facilities, and the continued integration of fire and emergency medical services.

Staffing

VIFEMS currently employs 291 personnel, organized into units or divisions based on function.

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 primarily consists of single-role emergency medical providers, including Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), Advanced Emergency Medical Technicians (AEMTs), and Paramedics. The ambulance boat crew is also assigned to this unit.

The Prevention Unit investigates fires, educates the public on fire prevention, and enforces fire and life safety codes. It consists of Inspectors and is led by the Fire Marshal.

The Maintenance Division is tasked with maintaining and repairing the agency's fleet and other mechanical equipment.

The Administrative Unit supports the other units and divisions and performs administrative functions such as financial management, human resources, and procurement.

Staffing has remained an issue for VIFEMS, with the Suppression and EMS Units having the most critical staffing needs. Recent Firefighter/EMT recruit classes have helped to address the issue, but the number of new hires has not been sufficient to eliminate staffing gaps in the Suppression Unit. While recruitment and retention of fire personnel have not typically been a concern, separations due to retirement have reduced overall staffing gains. To achieve optimal staffing levels, VIFEMS will continue to request FF/EMT vacancies each fiscal year and apply for grants to support hiring when possible.

Since the integration of fire and emergency medical services, there has been a significant increase in the number of EMS providers the agency employs. With new recruits and some existing fire personnel earning National Registry EMT certification, the number of EMTs has grown. However, there is still a critical need for Paramedics. Recruitment has been challenging in recent years due to a national shortage and other contributing factors. Nonetheless, our continued efforts have recently resulted in two new Paramedic hires in the St. Croix District.

In addition to recruitment, we hope to see an increase in Paramedic staffing through training. Several EMS practitioners are working to advance to the Paramedic level, and we are optimistic that they will be able to fill future Paramedic vacancies upon successful completion of their studies.

As expected, the aforementioned staffing challenges have increased the need for overtime. However, with the addition of Class 2025-01, we anticipate seeing a reduction in overtime usage and will work to further reduce overtime by consistently filling critical positions through hiring or internal advancement.

Vehicles and Equipment

Over the last several years, we have focused on expanding and upgrading our emergency response fleet. In 2025, Marine 1, a state-of-the-art firefighting vessel, was placed into service, and in early 2026, seven (7) new ambulances were commissioned. Three of these ambulances have been assigned to St. Croix, three to St. Thomas and one to St. John. Some of the older ambulances will be removed from service while others will remain in the fleet.

Our intent is to continue the fleet expansion initiative and work to secure grant funding for the purchase of additional fire apparatus to include tankers.

Procuring critical equipment also remains a top priority. Utilizing grant funding, we recently purchased Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) and are awaiting their arrival in the Territory.

Facilities

In addition to upgrading our fleet and equipment, we also continue to prioritize facility improvements, most of which are funded through disaster recovery grant awards.

Recovery projects consisting of repairs and hardening have been completed at the George Scott Maintenance Building, the Emile Berry Fire Station, and the Omar Brown Sr. Fire Station.

Additional recovery projects for the Herbert L. Canegata Fire Station and the Emile Henderson Sr. Fire Station are currently in progress.

Also underway are projects for the replacement of the Renceliar I. Gibbs, Robert O'Connor, George Scott and Fortuna fire stations, which are all part of the Territorial Fire Bundle. A firm has been selected to serve as the Construction Manager at Risk for these projects and will provide pre-construction services as well as ensure the completion of construction at a guaranteed maximum price.

Work on the Charles A. Seales Fire Station, which is not included in the bundle, is suspended pending a determination from FEMA. Efforts are underway to address the pause and move the project forward.

Aside from these major projects, VIFEMS leadership continues to work diligently to address maintenance and other issues at the stations as they arise.

Integration

Since the passage of Act 8545, which created the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services, significant progress has been made in integrating fire and EMS operations and building capacity as an EMS organization.

Notable EMS integration accomplishments achieved under VIFEMS include:

- Establishing a distinct National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) account for VIFEMS;

- Securing a Certificate of Need from the Department of Health to operate territorial ambulance services;
- Obtaining a DEA registration to procure and manage controlled substance medications;
- Significantly increasing the number of firefighters cross-trained as EMTs;
- Expanding the paramedic workforce across districts;
- Successfully launching the first in-house National Registry EMT Training Program;
- Acquiring two all-terrain EMS response vehicles through grant funding;
- Acquiring eight EMS quick response vehicles through grant funding;
- Acquiring seven new ambulances through grant funding; and
- Securing a dedicated Employer Identification Number (EIN), with support from this body and Governor Bryan, thereby enabling the agency to pursue its own Medicare Provider Number and implement its first electronic billing system to improve revenue collection.

Closing

This concludes the overview of current operations. I wish to close by thanking the men and women of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services. Their dedication, resilience and commitment to service drive daily operations, and we are grateful for all that they do.

The executive team and I look forward to your questions.

