



# VITEMA

TESTIFIER: Stephen M. DeBlasio, Sr., Assistant  
Director

## 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands

Committee on Homeland Security, Justice,  
and Public Safety  
January 31, 2024

Public Safety Update – This committee hearing is the second meeting dedicated to addressing public safety and security issues on the island of St. John.

2 Good morning, Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman, Committee on Homeland  
3 Security, Justice, and Public Safety, other committee members and members of  
4 the 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature, legislative staff, and those in the viewing and listening  
5 audience. I am Stephen M. DeBlasio, Sr., Assistant Director of the Virgin Islands  
6 Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA). With me today, I have  
7 Deputy Director of Operations, Bruce Kelly, and Deputy Director of Logistics,  
8 Asim Frett. Thank you for allowing us to come before you today to provide  
9 information regarding 911 communication services related to public safety and  
10 security on the island of St John.

11 As in every jurisdiction throughout the country, our 911 Call Center is a critical  
12 operation necessary to provide swift response to the residents of this territory who  
13 are in need of emergency assistance. We have two fully operational 911 call  
14 centers, one on St. Thomas and one on St. Croix. Each center is staffed 24/7 where  
15 they receive emergency calls, collect data and triage incidents, determine what  
16 resources are needed, and appropriately dispatch Fire-EMS, VIPD, or other  
17 resources as needed to the scene.

18 Regarding staffing, we have a total of sixteen (16) dispatchers on St. Thomas and  
19 nineteen (19) on St. Croix. We also have a recent pool of applicants for call center  
20 operators on both islands and hope to onboard new staff within the next sixty (60)  
21 days depending on the results of the interview and screening process. Currently  
22 we operate the call centers with a minimum of four (4) staff per center per shift  
23 working in eight (8) hour shifts.

24 We have been working assiduously over the past several years to address  
25 historical concerns with 911 calls rolling over and low staffing numbers. In 2022,  
26 we upgraded our phone technology to the current industry operating standards to  
27 include a new CAD-RMS system, which is a Computer Aided Dispatch – Record

28 Management System. This allows for real-time sharing of call and dispatch  
29 information between both districts and has aided in minimizing roll-overs.

30 As we are here today to discuss the public safety needs of St. John, in particular,  
31 we recognize that there are some challenges within our system. We know that  
32 intimate familiarization with the landscape and neighborhoods of St. John is  
33 helpful when dispatching emergency assistance. Although anyone residing on  
34 any island in our territory is free to join our staff, we do not currently have any  
35 St. Johnian representation in our call center staff. To offset this, we have arranged  
36 for our St. Thomas call center staff to partake in ride-alongs with our public safety  
37 partners in St. John to familiarize themselves with the island. We have at least  
38 two such ride-alongs scheduled for February 2024 and anticipate as new staff is  
39 onboarded that this effort will continue.

40 In addition, we know that many cell phone callers in St. John have difficulty with  
41 cell tower signals and, in fact, callers on the farthest ends of St. John, like Coral  
42 Bay, routinely bounce off of cell towers in the British Virgin Islands. Obviously,  
43 this poses a challenge for those needing 911 assistance. We do have a direct  
44 number, (340) 776-9110, that can be called in those instances which goes directly  
45 into the 911 call center. It is important to note, however, that unless calling from  
46 a landline or with a strong cell signal, callers who don't have the necessary signal  
47 strength may not be able to dial that number directly. In those instances where  
48 911 is the only option but goes to the BVI, we have a standing agreement with  
49 the BVI ECC that if and when a 911 cell phone call is received by them, they  
50 have a protocol in place to immediately transfer the call to the ECC on St Thomas.

51 In conclusion, Senator Gittens, VITEMA appreciates and supports the efforts of  
52 this body to address and support the island of St John and we will continue to  
53 train and develop our staff to be effective and efficient in the execution of their  
54 critical duties.

55 Thank you and my team and I stand ready to answer any questions that this  
56 Committee may have to the best of my ability.