TESTIMONY OF DARYL A. GEORGE SR.,
DIRECTOR OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS FIRE SERVICE

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY, JUSTICE & PUBLIC SAFETY

34TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

MARCH 23, 2021
Good morning Honorable Chairman Steven D. Payne Sr., other esteemed members of
the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety, all other honorable
members of the 34th Legislature, and the listening and viewing audience.

I am Daryl A. George, Sr., Director of the Virgin Islands Fire Service. Today, I am
accompanied by the VIFS Management Team: Mr. Antonio Stevens, Assistant Director
of Fire; Mr. Lisle Evelyn, Assistant Director of EMS; Mrs. Charmaine Akers-Hewlett, Chief
Financial Officer; Mrs. Barbara Williams-Brown, Director of Human Resources/Payroll;
David Hodge, Fire Chief-St. Thomas/St. John District; Klebert Titus, Fire Chief-St. Croix
District; Mr. Paul Christian, Deputy Chief of Operations-St. Croix District; Mr. Eustace
Grant, Deputy Chief of Operations-St. Thomas; and Mr. Clarence Stephenson, Deputy
Chief of Operations-St. John.

My team and I thank you for the opportunity to update this Committee and the listening
and viewing audience on the Fire Service’s operations.

Agency Overview
Established as an executive branch agency in 1979, the Virgin Islands Fire Service has
been in existence for over four decades. Initially, the agency’s responsibilities were
limited to the suppression, investigation, and prevention of fires. However, with the
passage of time, its responsibilities and capabilities have grown. It is now responsible
for providing responses to hazardous materials incidents, auto entrapments, incidents
requiring low-angle and high-angle rescue, and medical incidents. Under the Territorial
Emergency Operations Plan, it is the lead agency for firefighting (ESF-4), search and
rescue (ESF-9), and hazardous materials incidents (ESF-10).

The agency operates or supports 11 fire stations, strategically located throughout the
Territory, and employs 279 personnel. Each employee is assigned to one of the
agency’s three units, which are the Suppression Unit, the Arson Investigation and
Prevention Unit, and the Administrative Unit.

Suppression Unit
The Suppression Unit is responsible for emergency operations and is the largest of the
three units. It is staffed by first responders, holding the ranks of Firefighter, Corporal,
Sergeant, Lieutenant, and Captain. All of the unit’s personnel are trained in firefighting;
however, some are also specially trained in other emergency response disciplines such
as HazMat, rope rescue and emergency medical response. The unit responds to fires,
auto entrapments, rescue calls, Hazmat incidents, medical calls and requests for mutual
aid.

Arson Investigation and Prevention Unit
The Arson Investigation and Prevention Unit is tasked with investigating and preventing
fires. The unit’s fire prevention activities include public education and code
Personnel assigned to this unit hold the ranks of Fire Marshal, Fire Inspector, and Deputy Inspector. Presently, three members of the Unit are certified peace officers.

Since the state of emergency was declared, the unit has also been given the responsibility of enforcing new occupancy requirements. Additionally, one of the peace officers assigned to the unit has been working with VIPD’s COVID enforcement task force.

**Administrative Unit**

The administrative unit supports the other units and performs functions such as financial management, human resources, and procurement. It is staffed by unsworn personnel, who are assigned to either the Financial Team or the Human Resources Team.

**Staffing**

Having adequate staffing for all of the agency’s units is essential to the Fire Service’s operations. As such, the management team and I have made hiring the necessary personnel a priority. Upon taking office, we developed a strategic plan to ensure the Suppression Units in both districts are properly staffed. Thus far, the implementation of the plan has been successful. In 2020, twenty (20) new Firefighters were trained and assigned to shifts in the St. Thomas/St. John District. Since then, an additional seventeen (17) Firefighters have been hired, trained, and assigned to shifts in the St. Croix District.

The agency will continue to implement its hiring plan and anticipates hiring eight (8) new Firefighters in the St. Croix District and twenty (20) new Firefighters in the St. Thomas/St. John District within this calendar year.

The hiring of new firefighters has not been the agency’s only focus. The promotion of current personnel has also been a priority. Since 2019, twenty-six (26) employees assigned to the Suppression Unit have been promoted to ranks ranging from Corporal to Captain, helping to ensure that the unit is appropriately staffed at all levels.

Staffing efforts have not been limited to the Suppression Unit. After an internal promotion created a vacancy in the Administrative Unit, a Receptionist/Collector was hired for the island of St. John.

**Equipment**

In addition to staffing, equipment is also critical to the agency’s operations. Given that much of the Fire Service’s budget is allocated to personnel costs, most of the agency’s equipment is purchased through grant funding.
Bunker gear, hoses, nozzles, extrication tools, and other equipment were recently procured with funds from several grant awards. All items have been received, and personnel have been trained on the use of the extrication tools.

**Vehicles**

Vehicles, like firefighting equipment, are essential tools for fire personnel. Fire apparatus not only transport personnel and equipment, but they also serve as a water source.

The Fire Service has an aging fleet of emergency response vehicles comprised of seven (7) tankers, eight (8) pumper, four (4) quick attack vehicles, three (3) rescue vehicles, two (2) HazMat vehicles, and two (2) ladder trucks. Given the concerns the age of the fleet raises, the agency has been working to secure approximately $1.6 million in funding to purchase several new apparatus.

To augment the current fleet and enhance medical and rescue response capabilities, grant funding in excess of $469,000 has been secured for the purchase of (four) 4 quick response vehicles and two (2) rescue vehicles.

The rescue vehicles have been ordered as well as a vehicle for the Deputy Chief of Operations in St. Thomas, a vehicle for the Assistant Director of EMS, and pickup trucks for the two main stations on St. Croix. The vehicles currently assigned to the Deputy Chief and the two main stations are in need of replacement, and the Assistant Director of EMS does not presently have a vehicle assigned to him. This new vehicle will enable him to respond to medical calls as necessary.

**Facilities**

Another key aspect of the Fire Service’s operations is fire stations. All of the stations operated by the agency are strategically located to ensure efficient responses.

Each of these stations sustained damages during the 2017 hurricanes, and the agency has been working with its disaster recovery partners to secure grant funding to repair or rebuild them.

The Fire Service has seen progress with regard to its disaster recovery projects, and I am happy to report that several projects have been finalized or have had funding obligated since we were last before this body.

They include projects to repair and harden the Herbert L. Canegata Fire Station and the Emile Henderson Sr. Fire Station on St. Croix as well as the Emile Berry Fire Station on St. Thomas.

The previously obligated project for the rebuild of the Charles A. Seales Fire Station has
been moving forward, and significant progress has been made in the design phase.

Although not obligated, we have seen forward movement on the projects for the agency’s other stations and are hopeful they will be obligated this year.

**Projects/Initiatives**
In addition to continued efforts to secure disaster-recovery funding, the Fire Service has been working on several other projects and initiatives.

**COVID-19 Mitigation**
In the last year, the Fire Service has worked to keep employees and the community safe during the pandemic. The agency implemented policies to ensure the safety of all personnel and have been proactive in dealing with possible exposures, temporarily closing and sanitizing facilities, as needed. As a result, there have been minimal interruptions to operations due to COVID-19 infections or exposures.

Our Assistant Director of Fire Antonio Stevens has served as the lead for the COVID-19 Task Force, and as previously mentioned, our Prevention staff have been enforcing new occupancy requirements.

**Implementation of CAD/RMS**
As with the Territory’s other first responder agencies, the Fire Service is a stakeholder in the CAD/RMS project, which includes the implementation of a computer aided dispatch system and a records management system. The agency has begun the phased implementation of both.

**Hosting of Caribbean Association of Fire Chiefs Conference**
Another of the Fire Service’s major projects has been the planning and hosting of the 2021 Caribbean Association of Fire Chiefs Conference. Initially scheduled to be held from May 9-15 on the island of St. Croix, the conference will now be held virtually.

**Integration of the Fire Service and Emergency Medical Services**
The Fire Service continues to prepare for its integration with the Division of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and has been steadily working on enhancing its medical response capabilities. As previously mentioned, funding has been secured for the purchase of four (4) quick response vehicles, which can be used to respond to medical calls.

Additionally, the agency has been working to increase the number of personnel who are trained emergency medical providers. Two firefighters are currently enrolled in Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) training. And, two other Firefighters have completed the training and are doing ambulance clinical rotations. Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) training has been completed in the St. Thomas/St. John District and is
expected to begin shortly on St. Croix. The agency hopes to have 20 nationally-registered EMRs, and an additional 10 nationally-registered EMTs by the end of the year.

I will now conclude my testimony by thanking the men and women of the Fire Service for their service. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. My team and I await your questions.