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Senate committee hears public safety concerns from St. John residents

By SARA KIRKPATRICK Daily News Staff
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Coral Bay Community Council Executive Director Monica Miller-Smith speaks during a Senate hearing Wednesday on St. John.

To help address concerns of residents, senators learned Wednesday how the V.I. Police Department is handling undocumented individuals and other criminal matters on St. John.

The Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety met at the Cleone Creque Legislative Conference Room. Police Commissioner Ray Martinez was in attendance along with St. Thomas–St. John Chief Steven Philip and St. John Deputy Chief Clayton Brown.

During a previous meeting on Nov. 9, 2023, committee members subpoenaed Police Department leadership to compel their attendance.



Martinez confirmed that St. John is the primary point of entry into the territory for undocumented persons.

“Just this month, we have come in contact with over 150 undocumented persons here on St. John,” Martinez said.

He also reported that in 2023 the Police Department encountered 627 undocumented individuals on St. John, and 229 were apprehended by federal partners.

He said that based on federal statutes, some individuals are released back into the community.

Martinez said undocumented individuals are coming into the territory from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, the Eastern Caribbean islands, Romania, Cameroon, Venezuela, Paraguay, Argentina, Cuba, and Ukraine.

“By our estimations, 60% of the individuals are unknown to us, so that’s easily probably more than 2,000 plus undocumented persons that come through here,” Martinez added.

He said that calls from concerned citizens have assisted the police and federal partners in apprehending individuals who may be assisting in transporting undocumented persons into the territory.

“Especially the Coral Bay community, we truly appreciate the fact that they do continue to call, their calls are timely, and it provides us the opportunity to get out there,” Martinez said.

St. John residents also pointed out the “deplorable” condition of the police station on St. John.

Martinez said they are still working to find a temporary location for their officers while the FEMA-funded retrofitting takes place.

“We need them out of the building before the height of the next hurricane season,” Martinez told senators.

VITEMA Assistant Director Steve DeBlasio also testified, telling the committee that an issue faced by Coral Bay and the East End of St. John is that cell phone calls will routinely bounce off cell towers in the British Virgin Islands.

“We do have a direct number, 340-776-9110, that can be called in those instances which goes directly into the 911 call center,” DeBlasio said. “It is important to note, however, that unless calling from a landline or with a strong cell signal, callers who don’t have the necessary signal strength may not be able to dial that number directly.”

He said that in instances where a 911 call is directed to the BVI, they have a standing agreement with their emergency personnel that the call will be transferred to the emergency call center on St. Thomas.

DeBlasio said that another challenge faced while dispatching emergency assistance is the lack of St. Johnians among emergency call center staff.

“To offset this, we have arranged for our St. Thomas call center staff to partake in ridealongs with our public safety partners in St. John to familiarize themselves with the island,” DeBlasio said. “We have at least two such ridealongs scheduled for February 2024 and anticipate as new staff is onboarded that this effort will continue.”

V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Services Acting Director Antonio Stevens pointed out that there are fire and emergency medical service personnel stationed in the towns of Cruz Bay and Coral Bay to ensure a quick response to emergencies.

Recently, VIFEMS purchased two fire trucks constructed specifically to navigate St. John’s unique terrain.

“Fire personnel responding to a recent fire found it less challenging to traverse narrow roadways and gain access to the fire scene,” Stevens said.

He pointed out that VIFEMS is building a fire boat that should be completed by the end of this year. Stevens said its primary use will be for marine firefighting, but the vessel can also be utilized to transport EMS and non-EMS patients.

St. John Rescue President Bob Malacarne also testified, pointing out that his organization has four emergency vehicles and two rescue boats.

It currently has 24 volunteers who can provide lifesaving First Aid, AED and CPR until more advanced support from other agencies is available, he added.



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