

# ST. THOMAS SOURCE

Published on *St. Thomas Source* (<http://stthomassource.com>)

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## Senators, Officials Say They Support Pay Cut to Fund Homeless Services

Senators and Human Services officials all agreed Thursday night to take a pay cut in an effort to free up more money for the homeless.

"Let's all go back down to \$65,000," Senate President Louis P. Hill said during the evening half of Thursday's Appropriations and Budget Committee meeting. "Let's bring a bill at the next session to reduce salaries for government employees making \$85,000 and above."

The suggestion was originally made by Sen. Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, who said earlier in the meeting that the government isn't really channeling money toward organizations that are geared toward helping the territory's homeless population. Any kind of funding is generally put in the miscellaneous section of the government's annual budget, and that gets "significantly" cut each year, she said.

"We do not have a true, honest, genuine commitment to help the homeless in our territory," Rivera-O'Reilly said.

Human Services Commissioner Chris Finch said most of the federal dollars provided through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act would be channeled through the V.I. Housing Finance Authority for client services – or providing rental assistance to homeless individuals.

But there is also some federal dollars earmarked for job training, and Human Services plans to turn them over to local non-profits directly work with the homeless, he added.

"I know that these groups need operating money," he said, referring to organizations such as Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands and Ten-Thousand Helpers. "And we've been having conversations within the Governor's Office -- notwithstanding whatever this body decides to do -- to set aside money."

Hill said later in the meeting that having government officials take pay cuts would be an effective way of helping to solve the current fiscal crisis.

Meanwhile, the rest of the meeting was productive, with senators commending department officials for the work they do within the community. Some discussed improving the territory's foster care system, which Finch said Human Services is trying to restructure into a multi-level system that would allow foster families to receive additional training and subsidies so they can become qualified to take on children with "more difficult needs."

Others discussed building another Youth Rehabilitation Center on St. Thomas, which Finch said is not something he's considering right now.

"We're searching for money to rebuild the YRC on St. Croix," he said. "So if there's money, we'd like to work on the existing one because several of the buildings need to be replaced."

There was also discussion on getting more beds for mentally ill seniors, better

transportation for individuals in the Human Services programs and publishing the names and pictures of juvenile offenders that might pose a threat to the community, among other things.

The department's fiscal year 2010 General Fund budget is \$56.5 million. Human Services is also slated to receive: \$1 million from the Crisis Intervention Fund, \$1.8 million in local funds and \$26.5 million in federal funds for an overall budget of \$85.9 million.

Present during Thursday's meeting were Sens. Craig W. Barshinger, Carlton "Ital" Dowe, Hill, Wayne James, Terrence "Positive" Nelson, Rivera-O'Reilly, Samuel Sanes, Patrick Simeon Sprauve and Alvin L. Williams.

Local news

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