

**BUDGET HEARING PRESENTATION
OF
ATTORNEY RICHARD AUSTIN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR/CEO
LEGAL SERVICES OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS, INC.
BEFORE THE
31ST LEGISLATURE OF THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
COMMITTEE ON FINANCE
THE HONORABLE SENATOR CLIFFORD F. GRAHAM, CHAIR
June 22, 2016**

Good afternoon, Chairman Graham and other members of the Committee on Finance of the 31st Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands. I am Attorney Richard Austin, the Executive Director and CEO of Legal Services of the Virgin Islands, Inc., (LSVI), commonly known as "Legal Services". I am accompanied by Attorney Chivonne Thomas Jones, Chairperson of the LSVI volunteer Board of Directors; Attorney Shelby King Gaddy, the Managing Attorney/St. Croix office and agency wide Litigation Director and Mr. Kenneth Guye, Director of Finance and Administration and CFO.

We look forward to the opportunity each year to appear before this committee to present to you and the taxpayers' evidence of our efficient, effective and fiscally responsible stewardship over the funds entrusted to us by the Virgin Islands Government. We are here to support the sum of \$1,368,331.00, which is the amount we submitted to OMB to be included in the miscellaneous section of the Governor's FY17 budget. This sum will also allow us to maintain the *status quo*, our present level of service delivery.

LSVI is the "Equal Justice Advocate" in the territory. Its mission as stated in the mission statement is as follows: *"To access justice, protect rights and educate people in poverty in order to empower*

them to move toward self-sufficiency.” It is a non-governmental, 501(c)(3) not for profit corporation, whose primary purpose is to provide high quality civil legal assistance, free of charge, to low income persons, the elderly, victims of domestic violence and other disadvantaged individuals in the territory. We are a “public interest” law firm, which must adhere to all of the Professional Responsibility and Ethic Rules and Codes as any other law firm.

LSVI has provided high quality civil legal services to the client community territory-wide for over 45 years. It is governed by a 15 member volunteer Board of Directors. Its management staff is very efficient and effective. Its attorney advocates and legal support staff, who have over 80 years of combined legal practice experience, have an excellent reputation in the bar, courts and community for providing high quality civil legal assistance to eligible clients.

Each year Legal Services help thousands of clients navigate a life in poverty. They cannot access the civil justice system because they cannot afford a lawyer. Every day, they struggle to have safe, decent, and affordable housing; they face homelessness because of a wrongful eviction or foreclosure. Some seek protection from violence or abuse from an abusive spouse, or are fighting for custody of a child, or seeking a fair distribution of assets in a divorce. They may be Iraq or Afghanistan war veterans who have returned home to economic strain and confront legal issues. Or they may be elderly citizens who have fallen victim to fraud and lost their life saving. Some are low income individuals who are seeking a Power of Attorney or guardianship to provide for the care of a child or an elderly or disabled adult relative. They may be disadvantaged persons who need food or other basic necessities. Legal Services provide critical legal assistance to help them get and keep their homes. We help them escape violence. We help them get adequate, food, income and other resources to support their families. But we don't have enough resources to help all of those who have critical civil legal problems. There remain many unmet needs.

Since we cannot serve all of the client community's civil legal needs, we must set program priorities based upon an assessment of the most critical legal needs of the client community. In 2015 Legal Services served 1211 individual clients in separate legal cases. This has a multiplier effect of 3.5 (average number in a household), which means that we directly served approximately 4,239 individuals. These cases ranged from domestic violence to wrongful discharge claims. We also impacted the lives of thousands more through our community legal education outreach activities, which included media appearances and community legal education workshops. Further, we employ the maximum use of technology in all phases of our service delivery. We recently launched our new website www.lsvilaw.org.

We presently measure outcomes and the effectiveness of our services on a quantitative bases, which is by the numbers. We are exploring methodologies to better assess a more qualitative, or impact on the quality of life, approach to measure the value of our services rendered. We are presently engaged in a comprehensive strategic planning process, which will include both a planned and emergency succession plan. Also, in adopting the 2016 income eligibility guidelines, we adopted the Hawaii guidelines, which are higher than the guidelines for the 50 states, which we previously used. This will allow more people to be eligible for our services.

Our dedicated staff that provides these incredible services is presently at its lowest attorney level in the history of the agency. We have only three (3) attorney advocates in the St. Croix and St. Thomas offices. They provide civil legal services to a client population of approximately 40,000 individuals. I continued to be most grateful to our faithful staff, who have not had a raise in salary for many years. The 1.3 million plus dollars funding amount will only allow us to maintain the *status quo*. Our visionary or actual funding need is in the sum of 1.5 million dollars, would allow us to address many of the unmet needs of our client community. With these funds

we could add a full time attorney advocate in each office; give a well-deserved salary increase to all staff, especially the attorneys who earn approximately \$20,000 less annually than a government attorney with similar experience. We could also hire a much needed social worker in each office; hire a full time Private Attorney Involvement (PAI) Coordinator to increase the number of private attorneys to handle *pro bono* and low fee cases; hire a staff person to assist our Director of Finance and Administration/CFO, who presently handle fiscal matters, HR matters, physical plant matters and IT matters; and engage a resource development/fundraising person to seek other funding resources.

LSVI has been efficient and effective in its stewardship of providing equal access to the judicial system for our client population. By rendering the high quality civil legal services, LSVI has allowed many low income individuals, who would otherwise have no recourse in receiving equal justice because of their economic condition in life, to receive equal access to justice. LSVI which is the only agency in the territory providing this-vital service to the poor must continue to be properly funded to assure that justice and democracy will be maintained in these beautiful Islands we call home.

In closing, we request that you approved our funding in the sum of \$1,368,331.00, which will only allow us to maintain the *status quo* and continue to provide, "*Equal Access to Justice*" and high quality civil legal assistance, free of charge, to our client community. Also, we humbly and prayerful appeal to you to give our visionary budget of 1.5 million dollars utmost consideration.

We thank you for the opportunity to make this presentation to this Committee and the observing public, and we would be most happy to answer any questions.

Attorney Gaddy will present case data and accomplishments and answer any questions regarding the same; Mr. Guye will address

any fiscal/financial questions; and Attorney Jones will address questions regarding the governance of the agency; and of course I will address any questions directed to me.

Respectfully Submitted,
Legal Services of the Virgin Island, Inc.

Richard Austin, Esq.
Executive Director/CEO