



July 6, 2016

FY 2017 BUDGET: DOJ, PSC, VETERANS AFFAIRS

ST. THOMAS—The Committee on Finance, chaired by Sen. Clifford F. Graham, held a committee meeting to receive testimony from the Department of Justice, the Public Services Commission and the Office of Veterans Affairs relative to the FY2017 budget, Wednesday, at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall.

The Department of Justice presented a proposed budget consisting of \$15,531,583.00 with monies from both the General Fund and Miscellaneous Appropriations, as well as \$4,954,306.00 from non-appropriated federal finds.

Attorney General Claude Earl Walker spoke about departmental challenges and asked legislators for support as they executed duties to include initiating lawsuits on behalf of the Government and its agencies.

Walker testified that of the 405 adult cases filed in FY 2015 in the St. Thomas/St. John district, 290 are closed, while 115 remain open. In FY 2016: 59 are closed and 237 remain open. In the St. Croix district during FY 2015 492 cases were opened. In FY 2016, 181 cases were opened. Currently, there are a total of 489 open cases on St. Croix.

Walker emphasized the need for additional criminal prosecutors in the territory to aid in the backlog of open cases. Just several years ago, there were 12 on staff. Today, there are 6, he said. Hiring 6 or 7 additional prosecutors would allow the DOJ to be able "to function at maximum capacity", Walker added.

Sen. Graham commended Walker for laying out the need for additional employees though he noted that monies needed for those salaries was not included in the Department's budget request.

Attorney Walker also spoke to progress made as a direct result of the initiative, 'Operation Support Our Children'.

"There have been 23 license suspensions, and an additional 25 more are pending revocation for those non-custodial parents who have balances of \$2,500 or more and that have not either paid or entered into a payment plan. But, more importantly, the amount of outstanding uncollected child support money has significantly decreased," said Walker.

"You have to bear in mind that, this is not something we want to do but these persons—we have written to them, we've called them, we have begged them, pleaded with them to take responsibility for the financial well being of their biological children and they have refused or failed to do so," he said.

Sen. Marvin A. Blyden asked if garnishing wages could be an alternate option for those who need licenses to perform work-related duties.

In response, Walker said that after, in some cases, nine failed attempts to contact individuals, the license suspensions are the last resort.

"There isn't anything else for us to do but to use the statute, use the law that the Virgin Islands Legislature has provided to us to take action when we have parents who refuse to take care of their children," he said.

Donald G. Cole, Executive Director for the Public Services Commission, proposed the agency's budget request of \$1,782,085 which is \$28,409.00 more than Fiscal Year 2016 appropriation.

Patrick Farrell, Director of the Office of Veterans Affairs, also testified.

“For Fiscal Year 2017 our requested general fund appropriations are in the amount of \$884,000,” he said. “An estimated \$350,000 is to cover personnel salaries and fringe benefits; \$117,000 for operating expenses; \$300,000.00 to cover medical travel and death benefits.

Committee members, Senators Marvin A. Blyden, Clifford F. Graham, Tregenza A. Roach and Samuel L. Sanes, were present. Non-committee member, Sen. Justin Harrigan Sr., was also present.



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