

PRESENTATION OF ATTORNEY GENERAL
GORDON C. RHEA
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE'S FISCAL YEAR 2026 BUDGET
THIRTY-FIFTH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
COMMITTEE ON BUDGET, APPROPRIATIONS, AND FINANCE

Good morning, Chairperson Novelle E. Francis Jr., Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance members, other Senators, legislative staff, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Attorney General Gordon C. Rhea. It is a pleasure to appear before you and to justify Governor Albert Bryan's proposed budget for the Department of Justice's 2026 Fiscal Cycle.

The Virgin Islands Department of justice would like to thank the 35th Legislature for passing Act No. 8920 (Bill no. 35-0380) sections 3 and 153 which was signed into law on October 22, 2024. Additionally, we would also like to thank the 36th Legislature for passing Act No. 8985 (Bill No. 36-0047) signed into law on April 15, 2025. We are currently planning how to use these earmarked funds to improve our operating and capital project critical issues. Once we have a plan outline projected for September 30, 2025, we will share the outline for transparency and accountability of the funds.

The Department of Justice's primary goal is to protect the Virgin Islands' citizens and to advance their interests and well-being. I have met with the Deputies, Division Chiefs, Assistant Attorneys General, investigators, and staff on both St. Croix and St. Thomas, inviting them to identify problem areas and determine how

best to improve or correct those problem areas. Several pressing needs became evident. Critical was the lack of coordination among the departments and agencies responsible for law enforcement and justice, both local and Federal, all of which share a common mission and need to work as a team. Coordination with the courts and the criminal defense bar, including the Territorial Public Defender, was also much needed to help reduce congested court dockets and achieve swift and fair dispositions. Internally, the Department of Justice needed increased staffing, a modern IT case management system, training in trial and investigative techniques, coordination between attorneys and investigators, and an effective witness assistance program.¹

¹ I have invited several deputies and division chiefs to join me today to help answer questions about their respective areas of oversight. They are:

- Ian S.A. Clement, Chief Deputy Attorney General in the St. Thomas, St. John District
- Patricia Lynn Pryor, Acting Deputy Attorney General of the St. Croix District
- Pamela R. Tepper, Solicitor General
- Kathryn Jensen-de Lugo VI-D, Director of the Paternity and Child Support Division
- Christopher M. Timmons, Chief of the Civil Division
- H. Timothy Perry, Chief of the Criminal Division, St. Thomas, St. John District
- Amie Simpson, Chief of the Criminal Decision, St. Croix District
- Kaj Christopher, Chief Financial Officer
- Claudette Georges, Acting Operations Manager
- Maxine Sasso, Supervisor of the Office of the Medical Examiner
- Barrett Stridiron, Director of Information Technology
- Sherlene Luke, Director of Litigation Services
- Beverly Hermon-Wallace, Director of the Office of Human Resources
- Ronan Oliver David, Director of the Division of Gaming Enforcement
- Renee Petersen, Operations Manager, St. Croix
- Homer Innis, Director of the Special Investigations Division
- Julita de Leon, Director of the Medical Fraud Control Unit

We have made significant progress in most of these areas. We have developed a much closer working relationship with VIPD. Our prosecutors and their detectives and case agents meet regularly to discuss improving case intake, issuing warrants in a timely fashion, and preparing for trial. We coordinate with the U.S. Attorneys Office for more effective investigation and prosecution of complex and white-collar cases and for assistance in forensic analysis, and our prosecutors meet regularly with the Territorial Public Defender's Office to promote early disposition of cases, thereby helping to unclog court calendars. Recently, a team from the National Association of Attorney Generals spent the entire week of February 9 on St. Croix and St. Thomas giving our prosecutors and investigators intense training in trial and investigative techniques to ensure that our staff meets national standards. Our attorneys gained valuable skills, and the trainers were so impressed with one of our attorneys that they invited him to join their training team! We have also implemented procedures to ensure that our Special Operations Division (SID) works hand-in-hand with prosecutors preparing homicides and other major cases for trial and that our Victim Services Unit reaches out to victims and families to provide counseling and keep them current with developments in their respective cases. We have also put the final touches on a contract with Journal Technologies, a company that designs and installs case management systems for DOJ's across the nation, which will soon begin work on modernizing our case management system. Our new

system will communicate with VIPD's system, enabling prosecutors to promptly receive paperwork, body cams, and other material critical for efficient and effective prosecution.

DOJ remains seriously deficient, however, in filling its staff vacancies. The Saint Croix and Saint Thomas/Saint John Criminal Divisions each need four additional prosecutors and additional litigation assistants and victim advocates to handle their massive caseloads and cover the court rooms. The Civil Division also requires two more attorneys, and the Solicitor General's Division is four lawyers short. These deficiencies not only impact our attorneys' ability to perform their work but also leaves them exhausted and stressed, undermines their morale, and risks inducing them to leave.

During the past year, DOJ applied for an American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grant in the amount of \$5.4 million. The ARPA grant was expected to fund 22 new positions over the following two years. To our dismay, the expected grant was denied, and we are still struggling to find ways to compensate.

General Funds:

The FY 2026 recommended allocation for personnel services and fringe benefits will cover salaries and associated fringe costs for 166 positions including 20 vacant positions. To date, General Fund staff (86), Federal/Program Fund staff

(55), Vacancies (23), and new hires in progress (3) represent a current staff census of 163.

Of the 20 vacancies proposed for FY 2026, 12 have already been filled, are in the process of being filled, or have been reallocated. As of June 10, 2025, there are 23 actual vacancies (14 on St. Thomas, 9 on St. Croix), resulting from various actions including separations, promotions, or position reallocations.

Federal and Program Funds:

The Department's personnel services are also supported by federal grant and program funds. The FY2026 Federal Fund recommended allocation for personnel services and fringe benefits will support salaries and associated fringe benefits costs for 64 FTEs comprised of 55 filled positions and 10 vacancies. Eight of those vacancies are currently filled or in the process of being filled.

I will now share with this Committee the Governor's proposed budget breakdown of \$18,755,216.00.

From the General Fund, the breakdown is as follows:

- Personnel Services: \$10,375,145.00
- Fringe Benefits: \$3,875,684.00
- Supplies: \$302,344.00
- Other Services: \$3,907,843.00
- Utilities: \$294,200.00
- Capital Outlay: \$0.00

Total General Fund: \$18,755,216.00

Another \$12,967,541.00 of the Department's budget is projected to be funded by federal grants in 2026. Thus, the Department's proposed budget, including federal funds, is \$31,722,752.00. The FY-2026 general fund appropriations have increased by \$210,754, or 1%, from the FY-2025 general fund appropriation of \$18,544,462.00. This budget presents significant challenges for the Department to fulfill its Constitutional and organic responsibilities.

This represents the Governor's recommendation for funding the Justice Department over the next fiscal year. I will now briefly describe some of the Department's needs, accomplishments, and justification for the figures presented.

CIVIL DIVISION

The Civil Division accomplished much this past year. From FY-2024 through the third quarter of FY-2025, the Division resolved 69 matters. These include GVI v. VIGL, which secured the return of the St. Croix horse track's lease and concession; GVI and the Commissioner of DLCA v. Pepsi Co. Caribbean et. al, which seeks remedies for misrepresentations and public nuisance caused by single-use plastics brought into the Territory without adequate provisions for recycling or returning; GVI and DPP v. Caribe Craft Holdings, aiming to vacate the St. Thomas Justice Center in preparation for renovations critical to resolving a consent decree; and GVI v. Ocwen USVI Services, LLC, which seeks declaratory judgment that Ocwen violated the terms of its Economic Development Certificate because it failed to

materially source its income in the Virgin Islands. The Division also successfully moved the Court to permit VIPD to enter the sustainment phase in the Citizens Complaints portion of its Consent Decree, leaving only three remaining paragraphs of the Decree not fully compliant. The Division continues working with VIPD, the Monitors, and the USAO to conclude this longstanding case. It has also begun the process to terminate the paragraph of BOC's Consent Decree relating to medical care at the John A. Bell facility on Saint Croix.

In all, the Civil Division has 272 active cases. Of that number, 48 were opened in FY-2024 and 41 so far in FY-2025. Finally, the Division has processed 30 payable administrative tort claims received in FY-2024 and has received 13 administrative tort claims thus far in FY-2025.

PATERNITY AND CHILD SUPPORT DIVISION (PCSD)

PCSD has 2 administrative hearing officers, 4 attorneys, and 46 support staff. It is currently managing 6,481 cases, of which 3,064 are on Saint Croix and 3,417 are on Saint Thomas. It onboarded two special agents in the St. Thomas District who are currently being trained in investigating and preparing Project Save Our Children (PSOC) cases for Federal prosecution and is awaiting 5 new hires. PCSD also continues its effort to find individuals who may be entitled to undistributed funds and has successfully collected and disbursed some \$114,269. It expects to collect considerably more through its Financial Information Data

Matching application. Several computer upgrades have been planned and implemented, and the Division continues to work to lease a building on St. John to enable it to provide services to the island's residents there rather than requiring them to travel to St. Thomas.

PCSD's primary funding source is the Federal Government, which covers 66% of its expenditures. Accordingly, PCSD must meet minimum Federal standards, or Federal funding may be jeopardized. Before PCSD can draw down its Federal match, it must first expend its 34% local match. The Division's biggest problem on the financial side is late payments to its vendors. Although OMB released almost \$3 million for PCSD to use for its funding needs, DOF is often tardy in distributing those payments, which affects vendors' willingness to begin new projects for the agency.

Critical to PCSD's operation is the CSTARS system (Child Support Territorial Automated Reporting System), which the division has relied on since 2000. PCSD recently performed the first stage of upgrading CSTARS but has been unable to perform the critical second stage because of a lack of funding. CSTARS is central to PCSD's operation, as it is the system used to initiate, track, and terminate child support cases in accordance with Federal and local law. Obtaining the necessary funding is critical. We thank OMB for working with us to earmark in the 2026 budget the 34% of the funds needed to complete the upgrade.

SOLICITOR GENERAL DIVISION

The Solicitor General (“SG”) represents the Government in appeals and bond matters, prepares legal opinions, reviews contracts for legal sufficiency, and advises boards and commissions. Although the Division formerly had as many as twelve attorneys, today it has only three, including the Solicitor General, and three support staff. Providing advice to the many boards and commissions is a challenge. For example, DOH has some ten boards requiring legal advice. Having a designated attorney for that task creates efficiency, as the attorney would know the specialized laws, rules, and regulations.

On average, the Division reviews 450 contracts annually for legal sufficiency. From October 1 through April 30, it received 111 contracts, all of which it reviewed and sent to either the Governor or the Commissioner of Property and Procurement for signature. The Division tries to complete contract reviews within three to five days, which it generally accomplishes despite its attorney shortage. During this period, the Division received 26 appeals and 27 PERB cases. Working under such stressful and demanding conditions is challenging, but the Division is committed to doing its best with its limited but extremely dedicated staff.

CRIMINAL DIVISION

The Criminal Division is responsible for prosecuting local crimes while enhancing community safety and bringing justice to victims. Its attorneys appear in the Virgin Island's Superior and Magistrate Courts (14 courtrooms) representing the People in all Criminal, Traffic, and Family Court matters. The Division also handles expungements and extraditions.

The St. Thomas/St. John Criminal Division has 7 attorneys, including Criminal Chief Timothy Perry, 4 support staff, and 2 victim advocates. Thus far this fiscal year, they have opened 308 new cases; 176 involved crimes of violence, 89 involved domestic violence, and 51 involved illegal and unregistered guns. 6 cases involved homicide and murder, including *People of the Virgin Islands v. Justin Matthews*, in which the Superior Court sentenced Matthews to 30 years incarceration.

In Fiscal Year 2025, the St. Thomas/St. John Criminal Division resolved 403 cases by plea, trial or other methods, using the pretrial intervention program to divert first-time offenders into community service, anger management, parenting classes, and other positive outcomes for families and the community. Attorneys attended over 7,000 court hearings this year, an average of 143 hearings per week in Superior and Magistrate Court. They also participated in several other positive law-enforcement ventures, such as partnering with UVI's Department of Social Sciences

in founding and sponsoring the UVI Pre-Law Society, which aims to provide local college students with training, advice, and resources to encourage and support their application to law school and future legal careers.

DOJ's Saint Croix Criminal Division has 7 attorneys, including Criminal Chief Amie Simpson and Acting Deputy Patricia Lynn Pryor, 5 support staff, and 1 Victim Advocate. Between May 2024 and the end of April 2025, the Division opened 307 cases and closed (through trials, pleas, or other dispositions) 431 cases. Among the new case were 19 homicides, 108 domestic violence matters, 10 sex crimes, and 53 cases involving illegal firearms. The total number of criminal cases pending in the district is 465, which is a reduction by 213 cases from the previous year. The volume of work has been tremendous. During April, for example, the division's prosecutors attended 695 hearings and the sole victim advocate made 117 witness contacts.

The Saint Croix division has garnered an impressive record in securing formidable sentences for major offenders. Jiovanni Smith received a sentence of 30 years for murder, and his Co-Defendant Calijah Brewley is awaiting sentencing has executed a plea agreement which contemplates 20 years incarceration and his agreement to provide testimony. Randall Yates received the maximum sentence for Voluntary Manslaughter, and Rajah Caul received 30 years for murder. Sayif Brooks was recently sentenced to 8 years incarceration for negligent homicide by motor

vehicle; Curtis Williams was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for shooting and wounding a victim; and Tyley Smith was sentenced to 30 years for murder.

DOJ's Victim-Witness Advocates give critical support to victims and their families, providing emotional counseling and practical help to enable them to take meaningful part in the justice process. They also regularly contact victims to provide information about the status and schedule of their cases, facilitate victim meetings with prosecutors, and provide protection to and from court as needed. They also assist victims in preparing Impact Statements to ensure their voices are heard by the Court. We desperately need more of them.

The Criminal Division actively assists V.I.P.D., V.I.P.A., and other agencies investigate and develop cases. The Division's Chiefs meet frequently with VIPD leadership to discuss issues and ensure coordination. The Criminal Chief on Saint Croix, for example, tries to visit the police station once a week to sit with detectives to plan strategy, go through files, and coordinate warrants. She also encourages prosecutors to go to crime scenes, which can be vital to successful prosecution.

DOJ's Special Investigations Division (SID) now works alongside criminal prosecutors to ensure subpoenas are served, witnesses and victims are located and brought to court, participant are safe during court proceedings, medical examiner forensic technicians are supported, and various other assistance is provided as

needed. Regular meetings with DOJ staff, VIPD officers, and Federal law enforcement partners have led to more meaningful relationships and improved investigative work by all attorneys and agencies.

DOJ assists VIPD with Arrest and Search Warrants, including warrants involving cutting edge technology for tracking suspects via cell tower data and comparing DNA. DOJ has prepared hundreds of subpoenas to aid investigations, obtaining call records, surveillance footage, medical records, birth certificates and financial documents. Criminal Division attorneys teach at the Virgin Islands Police Academy, providing over 80 hours of classroom instruction, and they train badged peace officers about critical legal issues. Throughout the year, attorneys meet with VIPD officers to exchange information, develop suspects, and focus crime fighting resources on the Territory's most dangerous defendants.

DOJ has also spearheaded a working group with other GVI agencies to cure the lack of local mental health solutions – particularly within the criminal and family court divisions. Working hand-in-hand with BOC, DOH, DPW, and others, DOJ is helping to create housing and treatment alternatives for defendants who need to be evaluated and/or treated for mental health issues so that their competency can be restored. Currently, millions of dollars are spent on travel, treatment and housing for these individuals outside of the territory. To that end, DOJ has investigated whether competency restoration can be accomplished at the John A. Bell Correctional facility

and has arranged meetings of the stakeholders to examine the facility. We have located a section that should work and are coordinating to ensure that the site is appropriate and to create a competency restoration curriculum. We anticipate full implementation within the next fiscal year. If successful, this pioneering step will help ensuring that the mentally ill defendants are appropriately cared for WITHIN our community.

DOJ is also working on protocols for compliance with the Territorial Behavioral Health Act and is coordinating with the police to make sure that they bring offenders with mental health issues to the hospital before arresting them. If the hospital rejects them and an arrest needs to be made, we will then work with ALL stakeholders (defense, family, DOH, DHS, and stateside treatment providers) to find the best alternative. Where necessary, we will file guardianships and involuntary commitments in family court.

DOJ also plays an important role helping curb domestic violence. In October, along with DOH, DOJ spoke about the dynamics of domestic violence to V.I. educators at the 46th Annual TEACH “Together Educating America’s children” Conference. This January, in collaboration with the Family Resource Center, prosecutors participated in a workshop on Empowering Individuals to Prevent and Respond to Abuse. Recently, DOJ hosted a domestic violence summit, bringing together for the first time in years prosecutors, the VIPD domestic Violence Unit,

Victim Advocates, and professionals from around the community who work with domestic violence victims.

Finally, Family Court attorneys often handle cases in which children need assistance, either as victims of abuse or because they are causing havoc in their own families. As Judge Gallivan recently testified before this body, this type of case is only rarely reported to our office for appropriate filings. We have hired Diane Russell, an experienced attorney and prominent figure in the St. Croix community, in part to address this issue. She currently coordinates with all relevant agencies to foster better working relationships and ensure that our most vulnerable citizens are being protected.

In sum, the Saint Thomas and Saint Croix criminal offices both desperately need attorneys, litigation assistants, and victim advocates. The staffs on both islands work hard, but they cannot continue at the current intensity. Burnout and overwhelm are real. If we cannot provide our people with adequate resources and support, if we do not have sufficient staff to cover when people take leave ... If this situation continues, we will lose the very attorneys necessary to fulfill our mandate.

WHITE COLLAR CRIME AND PUBLIC CORRUPTION UNIT

The White-Collar Crime and Public Corruption Unit (“White Collar”) is staffed by its Chief, who is also my Saint Croix Acting Deputy, and who is assisted by a Criminal Division AAG in St. Thomas who also handles a general criminal

caseload. As in past budget presentations, we request assistance to fully staff this division with an additional full-time prosecutor and a forensic accountant or financial crime analyst. The White Collar Crime Division, in coordination with DOJ's Special Investigations Division, would benefit tremendously by receiving equipment and training necessary to undertake digital forensic examinations of electronic devices. Almost everyone these days has a cellular device, and critical evidence can be obtained through a search warrant for these electronic devices.

The White Collar Unit works closely with investigators from DOJ's Special Investigations Division and with VIPD's Economic Crime Unit. Most white-collar cases are resolved by guilty pleas, which enables victims to receive restitution more quickly and assuredly than if the defendant were incarcerated. Recently, we have secured guilty pleas from individuals who embezzled from their employers [Home Depot and K-Mart are two examples]; people who exploited elderly individuals by taking their money, property and even title to their homes; and hackers into the finances of innocent bank account holders. One businessman took money from at least a dozen victims after the 2017 hurricanes for delivery and installation of prefabricated houses. He recently pled guilty, agreeing to repay over \$500,000.00 in restitution. One couple pled guilty to hacking over 200 bank accounts and agreed to repay \$71,000.

Our White Collar Chief also educates the community about white-collar crime matters. She has talked to AARP and Rotary Clubs about how criminals try to scam them, how to avoid becoming a victim, and what to do if they discover someone has committed a financial or cybercrime. She has also joined forces with VIPD to establish a Legislative Committee to assist law enforcement officials in recommending new legislation.

MEDICAID FRAUD CONTROL UNIT

The Medicaid Fraud Control Unit (“MFCU”) investigates and prosecutes Medicaid provider fraud and patient abuse and neglect in healthcare facilities and at home. The United States Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General (“OIG”) oversees and annually recertifies and approves Federal funding for MFCU. The Unit is funded 100 percent by a grant from the OIG.

During this past fiscal year, DOJ’s MFCU worked closely with AARP to establish a Prescription Drug Monitoring Program for the Territory. This program, signed into law last December, will help combat Medicaid fraud by tracking prescription data and identifying potential misuse or abuse of controlled substances, thereby deterring fraudulent practices such as doctor shopping, acquiring prescriptions under false pretenses, and pharmacies processing phantom claims or falsifying prescription information. The new legislation will also help identify

providers who are writing illegitimate prescriptions for patients who intend to abuse drugs.

MFCU also oversees Virgin Islands related discovery in multi-jurisdictional litigations and Qui Tam cases in which it is a party. Currently, MFCU expects a settlement in the US DOJ's civil enforcement action against Gilead Science. MFCU's goals for the approaching fiscal year are to hire an investigator and an accountant for the Saint Croix District and, if possible, to obtain a 25% grant match from the VI government.

DIVISION OF GAMING ENFORCEMENT (DGE)

From November 2024 through March 2025, DGE received five referrals from the Casino Control Commission (CCC) to investigate alleged violations of casino laws, rules, and regulations. DGE completed these investigations and transmitted reports to the CCC. DGE also filed two Complaints against a Casino Licensee for violating the casino laws, rules, and regulations. During the referenced period, DGE responded to approximately 30 requests for technical assistance, opened some 119 due diligence investigations, closed 47 due diligence investigations, and currently has about 385 investigations pending.

DGE struggles with its low staffing level to perform its mandated duties at the two casinos. In FY-2025, the Division anticipated hiring two additional investigators

and an administrative assistance through the ARPA grant. Unfortunately, as described above, that grant did not materialize.

Several times, DGE and the CCC have proposed reallocating the Casino Revenue Fund derived pursuant to Title 32, VIC, Section 517, so that at least 10% of the revenue collected will assist with DGE's staffing needs. The Division had been assured that the necessary amendment would be made to effectuate that allocation, but that has never happened. The reallocation is critical to DGE's efficient functioning. While the CCC processes licenses for applicants, DGE investigates each applicant's qualifications before any license, certificate, or permit is issued. It is extremely difficult for DGE to accomplish that goal in a timely manner, as the same two employees who serve as gaming technicians to provide the casinos with mandatory support to keep the gaming machines operable are also the investigators who conduct all the investigations, in addition to their other duties. While DGE is doing the best it can, it needs more trained staff to perform its myriad of tasks in an efficient and effective manner.

SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS DIVISION

During the current fiscal year, the Special Investigations Division ("SID") has opened 15 cases, closed 13 cases, and served 426 subpoenas. SID is staffed on St. Thomas by 3 Special Agents, an Administrative Assistant, and the Director, and on St. Croix by 3 Special Agents and an Assistant Director. Although staffing shortages

remain critical, SID continues to meet its obligations. SID hopes to operate at full efficiency with the optimal number of 5 agents per district, supplemented by an investigative analyst in each district to research and analyze data and spreadsheets, record search results, and aid agents in preparing investigative reports.

This year, SID strove to ensure that its Special Agents are trained and certified in the latest law enforcement disciplines. Agents participated in several training programs, including Criminal Investigative Interviewing Techniques, Digital Evidence Training for Investigators, Ethics, Advanced Trial Advocacy, and Investigative Skills programs. Each discussed national standards and law enforcement practices and ways to apply these standards in the Territory. Agents also participated in mock scenarios geared to strengthen their investigative and interviewing skills.

SID's Director attended a roundtable discussion with the 35th Legislature and proposed several plans. A critical objective involves incorporating Special Agents into DOJ's criminal trial teams to support the AAG's and ensure that cases are prioritized and handled efficiently. SID aims to continue finding innovative ways to improve its efforts investigating and analyzing criminal activity, thereby increasing DOJ's successes and restoring the confidence of the people we serve.

OFFICE OF THE MEDICAL EXAMINER

The primary role of the Medical Examiner's Office ("MEO") is to determine an accurate cause and manner of death by thoroughly investigating the circumstances of all deaths under unnatural and unusual circumstances, including homicides, suicides, accidents, and sudden unexpected deaths that may have occurred in a suspicious manner. MEO staff conduct medicolegal death investigations, perform autopsies and external examinations, collect toxicology and other specimens, obtain relevant medical records, identify the deceased, and provide support to grieving families. They also handle unclaimed bodies that threaten public health and when no physician is available to sign a death certificate. Through thorough investigations, MEO staff assist attorneys in trial preparation and provide detailed reports about each death scene.

MEO currently has two medical examiners on contract and is actively recruiting for a full-time medical examiner. The Division is staffed by one Administrative Specialist, one Forensic Technician, and one Medicolegal Death Investigator stationed on St. Thomas; two Medicolegal Death Investigators on St. Croix; and one contract employee on St. John. Staff on all three islands are on call 24 hours, 7 days a week, to respond to death scenes, conduct medicolegal death investigations, and retrieve any decedents that fall under their jurisdiction. They remain prepared to act swiftly and skillfully in case of a mass casualty event.

St. Thomas has a fully functioning morgue, but there is no morgue or refrigerated storage facility for bodies on St. John, so bodies are transported from there to St. Thomas via a STJ Rescue boat. St. Croix still lacks a morgue. The autopsy suite and morgue at the JFLK hospital remains inoperable, rendering useless DOJ's memorandum of understanding with the hospital permitting the MOE to use the hospital's facility. DOJ's modular morgue is not yet up and running because of funding issues, problems with contractors, and issues with other government departments. This January, a satisfactory site was cleared for the project and negotiations were resumed with Vesta, the company handling the installation. That contract has been completed and, pending final approval by Property and Procurement, site preparation will resume and the morgue should be installed by late summer this year. Until then, bodies are being transported from St. Croix to St. Thomas for autopsy.

OFFICE OF SEXUAL OFFENDER REGISTRY

DOJ is charged with enforcing the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act ("SORNA") and the Virgin Islands Sex Offender Registration and Community Protection Act. Our SORNA staff registers and tracks sexual offenders within the Territory, including all visiting sexual offenders. This involves regular site visits to ensure offenders reside at their reported address and comply with their registration requirements.

SORNA comprises three critical positions: the Territorial Sex Offender Registry Program Manager, the Territorial Sex Offender Registry Investigator, and the Sex Offender Registry Coordinator. Last year's vacancies have been filled, and the team is now complete, fulfilling the SMART grant requirements and ensuring that SORNA effectively monitors registered offenders.

SORNA works closely with VIPD and the U.S. Marshal Service to investigate failures to register and to locate and apprehend non-compliant sex offenders. Partnerships also exist with other law enforcement agencies, including BOC, the V.I. District Court, the V.I. Supreme Court, and Customs and Border Protection to effectively monitor and track sex offenders in the Territory. SORNA also collaborates with stateside agencies to track offenders who move between the VI and the states. SORNA recently helped Florida apprehend an offender wanted for sex crimes against a child.

The division has some pressing needs. It requires an agent for the St. Thomas & St. John District so that offenders can be located within 24 hours of failing to register and apprehended within 24 hours of a warrant being issued for that failure. SORNA would also benefit from secure suites on St. Thomas and St. Croix separate from other DOJ facilities where sex offenders could report and register.

HUMAN RESOURCES

Although small, DOJ's HR Division of three dedicated employees ensures timely recruitment, promotes retention, and strives to ensure a smooth transition for those coming on board or leaving DOJ. Improving the overall employee experience and promoting staff retention by enhancing our agency culture and morale is a priority that has proven challenging due to funding constraints.

Team-building activities such as Battle of the Agencies are exceptional means of encouraging cohesiveness at DOJ. December saw the formation of the DOJ Activities Committee, whose first task was to develop and execute DOJ's presentations at all three Territorial Governor Children's Holiday Parties with the theme "Welcome to Justiceville." The unified effort showcased our staff's creative talents, boosted morale, and was unofficially recognized as the best agency presentation. HR staff also led a reception area decoration project at the St. Croix East building, which enhanced the workplace atmosphere.

HR coordinated the 2025 Employee of the Year selection in accordance with Division of Personnel guidelines. Today we recognize our St. Croix Honoree, Administrative Specialist Mrs. Edna Hamilton-Cirilo, and our St. Thomas honoree, Senior Attendant Mrs. Ermine Francis, who has since been promoted to Receptionist.

FY 2025 salary increases, including back pay, are in implementation for the two affected collective bargaining units (Our Virgin Islands Labor Union and Seafarers International Union, Assistant Attorneys General) as well as GVI General service (Non-Union) staff. To date, we have conducted 22 interviews (16 AAGs) with 2 AAG's onboarded and 3 AAG hirings in process. Salary increases for exempt staff were proposed but budget constraints again delayed DOJ's ability to compensate these deserving employees. Salary negotiations for the SIU collective bargaining agreement have also been delayed.

Recruitment efforts remain challenged by factors beyond DOJ's control. An example involves the hiring of Virgin Islands barred attorneys, who are generally disappointed by DOJ's salaries. DOJ, however, is bound by Seafarers International Union AAG collective bargaining agreement negotiated salaries, which limits the Department's flexibility in making salary offers.

In support of Governor Albert Bryan's Workforce Development initiative, DOJ hosts interns from the Territory's high schools, from UVI, and VI students residing abroad but returning to the Territory during study breaks. For FY 2025, we have hosted thus far 6 interns and welcome students aspiring for careers in criminal justice. HR also supports DOJ's Gaming Division's internship initiative with UVI's School of Business. This initiative provides the Gaming Division with much needed administrative support while also meeting Governor Bryan's Workforce

Development initiative, and the participants will receive a stipend funded by the Gaming Division. HR also strives to timely implement Division of Personnel initiatives, and the staff has been registered for the mandatory ethics training, Responsibilities and Conduct of GVI Officers & Employees. The GVI Sexual harassment Policy was also disseminated to ensure awareness and compliance and to foster a harassment-free workplace across DOJ.

A brief illustration of actions processed by HR to date includes: 109 NOPA actions consisting of 7 new employees onboarded, 5 utilizing general funds and 2 under Federal grant or program funds. Similarly, 5 promotions were awarded, with 3 utilizing general funds. There have been 12 separations distributed as follows: 10 Resignations (4 in the St. Thomas/St. John District and 6 in the St. Croix District); and 2 Retirements (1 in each District). (Gratefully, there are no descendants to report). The majority of processed NOPAs (84) represented negotiated salary increase implementations or annual Federal program funding changes, ensuring compensation continuity at the correct rates.

CONCLUSION

Senators, that concludes my prepared remarks. As you can see, the Department of Justice is doing all that it possibly can to do more with less and satisfy its organic and constitutional duties to the citizens of the Virgin Islands. My staff and I welcome any questions you might have.