

**BUDGET HEARING PRESENTATION
OF
ATTORNEY SHELBY KING GADDY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR/CEO
LEGAL SERVICES OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS, INC.
BEFORE THE
36th LEGISLATURE OF THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
COMMITTEE ON BUDGET, APPROPRIATIONS AND FINANCE
THE HONORABLE SENATOR NOVELLE E. FRANCIS, JR., CHAIR
AUGUST 15, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chairman Francis and other members of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance of the 36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands. I am Attorney Shelby King Gaddy, the Executive Director and CEO of Legal Services of the Virgin Islands, Inc., (LSVI), commonly known as “Legal Services”. I am accompanied by Attorney Damion Sanders, Territory-Wide Litigation Director/Managing Attorney of the St. Croix Office 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 the evidence of our efficient, effective and fiscally responsible stewardship over the funds entrusted to us by the Virgin Islands Government. LSVI continues to be a responsible steward of taxpayer dollars. Each year we receive and report the results of our annual audit, which again this year and has always been “unqualified” or a clean audit.

For FY 2025, the Governor’s budget included \$2,007,700 for Legal Services and the FY 2026 request is the same or \$2,007,700. Legal Services, like all the Legal Aid entities in the United States are underfunded to meet the growing demand for our assistance.

Nevertheless, we are extremely grateful for the funds received, especially given the circumstances.

We are here today to support the sum of \$2,007,700, which is the amount that was included in the Governor's FY2026 budget for Legal Services. This sum will allow us to maintain the *status quo* at our present level of service delivery. Over the past six years 2018-2024, LSVI has been in a continuous "rebuilding" posture to replace the experienced attorney resources lost after the 2017 hurricanes, while simultaneously growing to meet the needs of the community. LSVI lost three attorneys in 2024 and one in 2025, primarily due to attorneys seeking higher salaries in government attorney positions. Presently, the total number of LSVI attorneys are five (5), with four in St. Croix (not including the Executive Director), and one in St. Thomas.

When we began FY 2025, LSVI was seeking to fill three attorney vacancies. Then in December 2024, the newly created position of the Grants Compliance Manager was vacated due to health issues. Additionally, another attorney vacancy was created in March 2025. As a result, we have continued to re-imagine, re-structure and re-align job functions to meet the growing need for our legal assistance in the community. In addition to combining the St. Croix Managing Attorney position with the Territory-Wide Litigation Director, we hired two junior staff attorneys and two senior staff attorneys. Additionally, we have implemented procedures for using the technology to allow cases to be distributed and handled by available attorney staff in either district. With the technology in place at LSVI, intake interviews and limited representation matters can be handled without regard to which district the client resides. Moreover, we have combined the Grants Compliance Manager with Communications Coordinator into one position and recently hired to fill the vacancy. The Grants Compliance Manager allows LSVI to shift the grant reporting and compliance requirements from the

attorneys who are project directors, thus allowing them more time to engage in providing legal assistance and community outreach and education.

While we are still in search of a managing attorney and a junior staff attorney for the St. Thomas office. Legal Services uses technology extensively to stream line our delivery model and to accommodate teleworking or remote working, when necessary. To that end, we are in the process of completing a technology assessment to ascertain whether we are using our technology in the most efficient manner and whether our technology is adequate to achieve the goals based upon our plan of growth.

With the realignment of job functions, the Grants Compliance Manager will also be able to assimilate the data necessary for grant writing, strategic planning and creating a communications plan that supports the development plan. Meanwhile, LSVI engaged a consultant to assist with determining the strategic needs and the priorities that should be reflected in our development plan. We also engaged a consultant to assist the Board of Trustees in determining what the immediate resource needs are and to guide the process of creating a resource development plan appropriate for our organization. Resources include staffing as well as funds that are necessary to sustain the organization for meeting the needs of our community.

The Senior Medicare Patrol Project was initially implemented in 2018 to assist Medicare beneficiaries, families and caregivers to prevent, detect and report healthcare fraud, errors and abuse. As we have a rapidly increasing senior population who receive other legal assistance from LSVI, this program augments those services. We obtained federal funding in 2018-2023 for this program and hired a project director to coordinate the efforts. We are now in the 3rd year of the new five-year grant for this project that began June 1, 2023 and it has been a huge success.

Further, through the SMP program in collaboration with the University of the Virgin Islands, since 2022 we have been able to train 72 seniors who have successfully attained the necessary basic computer skills and knowledge, use of the internet and social media, etc. resulting in the issuance of over 125 Certificates of Completion. This allows seniors to engage in the telehealth appointments now offered by health care professionals and continue to eliminate the social isolation that was experienced during the pandemic from not being able to participate in the in-person social activities.

While, we are cognizant of the government's financial challenges created by the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the continuing effects of the 2017 hurricanes, and the reduction of some of our federal grants (LSC, VA, etc.) along with the anticipated potential impact of the recently passed federal funding legislation, the requested funds will only allow us to maintain the *status quo*. Simultaneously, we have and will continue to seek and secure other sources of funding to meet the extraordinary costs associated with providing services to our community. To that end, Legal Services was successful in obtaining funding from the Legal Services Corporation to assess, develop and implement a transformational pro bono program. The purpose of this program is to engage private attorneys to provide legal assistance to the eligible clients either free of charge or at a low rate which will also increase the attorney resources to meet the legal needs of our community. That grant closed out in late 2024 and resulted in a net increase of only 3 pro bono attorneys. Additionally, LSVI was awarded funds to provide legal services to homeless veterans and veterans at risk for homelessness. However, with the decreased staff resources and the need for a targeted outreach program for these veterans, the number of cases projected for this program have been well below the stated goals for the grant. Hence, the actual funding may fall below the awarded grant amount which expires in early 2026.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees a lawyer when someone is accused of a crime. However, there is no constitutional right to an attorney when someone faces a civil action. For example, unless you can pay for legal assistance you are on your own to try to rectify unsafe rental housing, challenge a wrongful discharge from a job, obtain a protective court order against an abusive spouse, fight for custody of your children, or secure veterans benefits you earned by your military service. It is very challenging to navigate the legal system on your own. Having legal assistance is crucial to protecting the liberty and justice for all upon which our nation was founded.

LSVI is the “Equal Justice Advocate” in the territory and our visionary theme for carrying out the mission is *“Equal Access to Justice, Anytime, Anywhere.”* LSVI’s 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.”* LSVI 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 persons of low income, 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 Ethics Rules and Codes as any other law firm.

LSVI has provided high quality civil legal services to the client community territory-wide for 56 years. LSVI is governed by an 11-member volunteer Board of Trustees. Its management staff is very efficient, creative and effective. Its attorney advocates and legal support staff, who have over 40 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.

Over the past year, LSVI has seen an increase in the number of evictions and domestic violence. These matters are in addition to the

range of issues typically experienced by persons living in poverty circumstances like employment matters and a wide range of other family law related matters. A lot of these matters create housing instability. Since 2023, we developed an enhanced Eviction Prevention Services, obtained financial assistance and began to provide housing stability legal services under the Emergency Rental Assistance Program.

LSVI updated its strategic plan and is into the first year of this new strategic plan which charts the course for the next 3-5 years, given a number of scenarios. The strategic plan continues to outline a course that is currently being followed which “re-imagined” a service delivery model designed to maximize our resources by employing the best tools available for providing effective and efficient civil legal assistance in accordance with our mission. As part of the strategic planning process, a formal comprehensive needs assessment was conducted and we affirmed that there are still many unmet legal needs in our community. Since we cannot serve all of the clients’ unmet civil legal needs, based upon the results of the needs assessment, we set program priorities. We are also expecting that the needs will be significantly increased given the federal legislation and executive orders.

Based upon the findings in the most recent community needs assessment, the following were identified as the most pressing legal needs. 1. **Housing**: Low-income persons have problems with finding safe, decent, stable and affordable housing. 2. **Health**: There is a lack of access to health care, including mental health, for the low-income population. 3. **Safety**: Many low-income individuals suffer from spousal abuse and other forms of domestic violence, including human trafficking. There was also a great concern for community violence. 4. **Family**: Low-income persons have many family-related matters in the preservation, support, custody, safety and welfare of families and individual family members. 5. **Elderly and Disabled**: Individuals because of their advanced age or infirmities face civil legal

needs in many areas. 6. **Economic Opportunity/Security**: Lack of decent paying jobs and the complex problems in keeping a job or income to sustain the family. 7. **Consumer Issue**: Low-income persons have many consumer problems, with far-reaching effects on a low-income person's ability to meet their most basic needs. 8. **Education**: Low-income persons have matters related to adequate education and support, financial aid or services and vocational training. 9. **Transportation**: We live on a number of islands where public and private transportation is limited for low-income individuals. The survey revealed many problems with access to public transportation. We are not certain how we can impact this problem by legal means. However, we re-invented our intake processes, policies and procedures to address many of the legal needs and overcome some of the challenges faced by the community.

The "re-imagined" service delivery system model that resulted from the strategic planning process was based upon the visionary theme of providing "Equal Access to Justice-Anytime, Anywhere". LSVI has a variety of intake methods, procedures and policies, including in person, telephone and on-line intake (via our website). After the intake is completed in real time, our goal is for clients to be contacted by an attorney within one-two business days, thus eliminating the need for scheduling an appointment to have an initial consultation which could be weeks later. The accessibility is significantly expanded with the Mobile Justice Units (MJU) which are designed to operate as mobile offices taking attorneys into remote locations of the community to provide on-site legal assistance. The MJUs have previously been at pre-scheduled locations in the community each week in both the St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John districts. However, we believe that there may be a need for more frequent use of the MJUs at different locations.

While we operate the MJUs to provide service in the community, our physical facilities are also used to meet with clients, stakeholders, etc. along with performing our administrative duties. We have temporarily relocated the St. Croix staff in some leased space

near Sunny Isle while we undertake a project to complete major repair and mitigation of the damage caused by the hurricanes of 2017.

Mr Chairman, Attorney Damion Sanders will give a summary presentation of an Overview of Cases and Other Matters handled by LSVI, as well as some success stories. (See Attachment "A").

In closing, as we go forward, LSVI will continue to seek ways to maximize our efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of service while serving as many clients as possible. The requested funding in the sum of \$2,007,700 will help LSVI meet the critical needs of our client community. We look forward to working with you to ensure that LSVI is properly funded and able to meet the goal of providing equal access to justice for all of the residents of the U.S Virgin Islands.

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.

Respectfully Submitted,

Legal Services of the Virgin Island, Inc.

Shelby King Gaddy, Esq.

Executive Director/CEO