

**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
JULY 24, 2026**

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 the Territory-Wide Litigation Director/Managing Attorney of the St. Croix Office.

We look forward to this opportunity each year to appear before this committee to present to you and the taxpayers the evidence of our fiscally responsible stewardship over the funds entrusted to us by the Virgin Islands Government. LSVI continues to be a responsible steward of taxpayer dollar as the results of our annual audit, again this year and has always been “unqualified” or a clean audit.

Legal Services, like all the Legal Aid entities in the United States is underfunded to meet the growing demand for our assistance. For FY 2026, the Governor’s budget included \$2,007,700 for Legal Services and the FY 2027 request is the same or \$2,007,700. The amount that was included in the Governor’s FY2027 budget for Legal Services is less than this amount.

However, between March 2025 and June 2026 LSVI did not get any allotments from the VI Government even though these funds had previously been appropriated. A lump sum payment received in June 2026 represented the past due quarterly allotment of funds appropriated to LSVI through the first quarter of FY 2026 or December 2025. Nevertheless, we are extremely grateful for the funds received, especially given the circumstances.

During these times, LSVI was fortunate that this shortfall of \$1,003,850 was covered by other short term special grant funds which are **now no longer available**.

Therefore, LSVI is requesting the same sum of \$2,200,700 for FY 2027. We are here today to support the sum of \$2,007,700, which is the same amount approved for the past two fiscal years. While the amount that was included in the Governor's FY2027 budget for Legal Services is less than this amount, we are adamant that the amount requested will allow us to maintain the *status quo* at our present level of service delivery, while properly staffing to reduce potential burnout and loss of attorney staff.

Since 2018, 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. Over the past two years LSVI has lost five attorneys primarily due to attorneys seeking higher salaries in government attorney positions. All of these attorneys have come from the mainland with varying levels of experience. Presently, the total number of LSVI attorneys are four (4), with three in St. Croix (not including the Executive Director), and one in St. Thomas.

When we began FY 2026, LSVI was seeking to fill two attorney vacancies. Subsequently, one additional attorney position was vacated and now three vacancies exist. Nevertheless, as you will see from our statistics, there is a consistent increase in the number of

persons served and cases handled. In order to meet the demand LSVI has continued to re-imagine, restructure and re-align job functions. In addition to the Executive Director also serving as the managing attorney for the St. Thomas office, LSVI combined the St. Croix Managing Attorney position with the Territory-Wide Litigation Director, while using 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, the Grants Compliance Manager position has been combined with the Communications Coordinator which 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.

We are still in search of a managing attorney and a staff attorney for the St. Thomas office and one staff attorney position in St. Croix. 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 the development plan. LSVI will seek to update the strategic plan in FY 2027 and is in 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. A part of the plan is to develop a “pipeline” for new hires

from law schools by offering internships and fellowships. This summer, LSVI engaged a 2nd year law school student as a law fellow.

The Senior Medicare Patrol (SMP) 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. The SMP outreach to seniors that includes estate planning has served to increase the numbers of clients requiring legal assistance. While we initially hired a project director to coordinate the SMP efforts, the position was expanded to be the Outreach Coordinator for all programs. We are now in the 4th 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 79 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 132 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 and the reduction of some of our federal grants (LSC, VA, VOCA, VAWA, etc.) the requested funds will only allow us to maintain the *status quo* with proper staffing. Simultaneously, we are continuing to seek and secure other sources of funding to meet the extraordinary costs associated with providing services to our community.

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 57 years. LSVI is governed by a 10-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, guardianships 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. And while the special grant funding has terminated, LSVI continues to provide the necessary legal assistance as a priority.

LSVI is well into the final year of its updated strategic plan to chart the course for the next 2 years, given a number of scenarios. The strategic plan outlined 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.

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 is 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, clients are contacted by an attorney within one business day, thus eliminating the need for scheduling an appointment to have an initial consultation which could be weeks later. The accessibility has been 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 are at pre-scheduled locations in the community each week in both the St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John districts on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

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.

Mister 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 Islands, Inc.

Shelby King Gaddy, Esq.

Executive Director/CEO