

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bodies Still Being Transported From St. Croix To St. Thomas For Autopsies, Signage and Barriers At Mitchell Hotel Still Not Installed, Lawmakers Learn

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Lawmakers learned during Wednesday's Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance meeting that bodies from St. Croix are still being transported to St. Thomas for autopsies due to inadequate staffing. Furthermore, promised signage and barriers at the problematic Mitchell Hotel have yet to be installed.

These pressing issues overshadowed a broader discussion on various appropriation transfer requests presented by Kimika Woods, associate director of budget operations in the Office of Management and Budget.

OMB itself led with a request for a transfer of \$672,000 from the "other services and charges" category to the "supplies and utilities" category, to finalize expenses such as building out office cubicles, air conditioning upgrades, and additional utility costs. The Department of Labor asked for a \$461,000 transfer to assist with the construction of their new offices on St. Thomas. The Department of Planning and Natural Resources sought a \$560,000 transfer for operational supplies and for renovation work at the Frenchtown Fish Market on St. Thomas, repairs to its Mars Hill offices, and the purchase of two vehicles.

The Department of Human Services aimed to move \$4.9 million for medical assistance claims deficits, the medical assistance program, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) obligations. The funds would also go towards replacing air conditioning units and preparing a new DHS location at the Sunny Isles Shopping Center on St. Croix.

Meanwhile, the Department of Health requested a \$800,000 transfer to cover maternal and child health program costs, facilities for behavioral health patients off the island, and increased lease costs for the relocation of their St. Croix offices.

Most notably, Ms. Woods disclosed that due to an ongoing lack of qualified medical examiners, the Department of Justice must still transport bodies from St. Croix to St. Thomas for autopsies. VIDOJ is requesting an appropriation transfer of \$385,000 to accommodate these and other operational costs. Last year, lawmakers were told that a modular facility for autopsies would be established on St. Croix by December 2022. However, those plans have been delayed indefinitely.

The Department of Public Works is requesting a transfer of \$900,000 for repairs and upgrades at Western Cemetery, and the Department of Property & Procurement is asking for \$300,000 for generators as part of its hurricane preparedness measures.

All appropriation transfer requests were unanimously approved by the lawmakers. Yet the meeting left unresolved the lingering questions about the systemic challenges represented by the absence of a St. Croix morgue facility and the ongoing neglect at Mitchell Hotel.