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Elections Supervisor Advocates for More Funding to Conduct Elections

Elections Supervisor details high costs of conducting primary and general elections, stressing the need for a \$200,000 supplemental budget

Election / **Published On June 21, 2024 05:51 AM /**

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Supervisor of Elections Caroline Fawkes By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Though the Office of Management and Budget has recommended a [budget of \\$2,500,000](#) for the Elections System of the Virgin Islands, Elections Supervisor Caroline Fawkes told lawmakers on the Senate committee of Budget, Finance and Appropriations on Thursday that the ESVI actually needs \$3,000,000.

She later revised that figure downward to \$2,700,000 after considering the central [government's current financial woes](#). "I understand the government is financially challenged right now, but there's some funding that they need to shake out from organizations that don't spend their money, to give it to organizations that need the balance of the money," Ms. Fawkes told senators.

She said the ESVI desperately requires the additional funding to effectively conduct primary and general elections. In FY2024, the Election System received a \$450,000 appropriation to host both elections. According to Ms. Fawkes, the amount was "not sufficient based on historical data." She testified that a primary election, on average, costs \$250,000, leaving a balance of \$200,000. "How can we be expected to conduct a general election with less funding than the primary election?" Ms. Fawkes asked lawmakers. "We will need a supplemental budget of \$200,000 to execute the 2024 general elections," she asserted.?

The elections supervisor also lamented the absence of a funding increase for ESVI over the past 5 years. "I can and will no longer take monies from the Office of the Supervisor or the Board of Elections' general fund to cover any elections-related expenses," Ms. Fawkes warned. She predicted that the funding stagnation, particularly in an election year, "will eventually place the Election System of the Virgin Islands in a precarious position."?

Making things even more precarious, Ms. Fawkes testified, is that the monies appropriated for the current fiscal year will not cross over into FY2025, when the general election will be held. It's a challenge that the elections supervisor says she is prepared to advocate for. "I was informed by the Office of Management and Budget to be sure the Legislature makes your appropriation available until expended...because our election cycle crosses fiscal years," Ms. Fawkes reported.?

Despite their best efforts at frugality, Ms. Fawkes explained that generally, the ESVI "[utilizes] \$150,000 just to do a primary in one district." Meanwhile, general elections have historically cost \$350,000. According to Ms. Fawkes, sufficient funds were not appropriated last year, creating the need for ESVI's \$200,000 supplemental budget request to bring the total funds available to be expended for that purpose to \$400,000.?

While Senator Frett-Gregory says that the Legislature is unable to make the election funds available until expended, she has promised to "look at how we can move the goal post on this...in an upcoming session."?

Despite the positive response in that regard, the Elections System of the Virgin Islands is now another on the list of entities that the Legislature has asked to provide a more detailed breakdown of its budget, after Ms. Fawkes disclosed that ESVI's FY2023 report seemed to omit some figures. Several lawmakers, including Senator Dwayne DeGraff and Ms. Frett-Gregory believed the officially presented figures.

According to the initial \$3 million request by the ESVI, \$1,400,000 is earmarked for personnel services, and \$394,000 for fringe benefits. Another \$30,000 is allocated for capital outlay, inclusive of reconfiguring cubicles in the St. Thomas office, and \$85,500 has been set aside for utilities. The ESVI anticipates spending \$65,000 on supplies and \$1,025,000 for training, which is 50 percent more than what was reportedly expended in FY2023.

Ms. Fawkes also presented lawmakers with the proposed budget of the Board of Elections, figures that also raised many questions given the discrepancy between OMB's recommended budget of \$250,000 and the Board's request of \$427,860 for FY2025. The ask included \$160,760 for personnel services and \$36,600 for fringe benefits. Supplies are expected to cost \$2,000 and other services, stipends, and training are expected to total \$268,500.

Ms. Frett-Gregory was interested in the justification for the large gap between the recommended budget, which has been held steady for the previous two years, and this year's request. "They had to increase their other services and training...and stipends...and conducting voter registration drives," was Ms. Fawke's explanation.

Board of Elections chair Alecia Wells had already dropped out of the meeting which she was attending virtually, and therefore could not provide further justification. Ultimately, lawmakers asked the Board to also provide a better breakdown to the Legislature.

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