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OCB Requests \$1.4 Million Budget to Address Rising Collective Bargaining Demands

OCB's budget includes significant funds for personnel, fringe benefits, and operational costs amid increasing workload and staffing shortages

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Nelcia Charlemagne **June 28, 2024**

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Chief Negotiator Joss Springette By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The Office of Collective Bargaining is [requesting \\$1,375,564](#) for its FY2025 budget to allow for the continued representation of the Government of the Virgin Islands in all collective bargaining proceedings.?

Joss Springette, the GVI's chief negotiator, on Thursday provided a breakdown of the budget, which includes \$772,895 for personnel services, \$330,716 for fringe benefits, and \$32,000 for

supplies. OCB's utilities for the upcoming fiscal year are estimated at \$13,000, paid through the Single Payer Utility Fund managed by the Department of Finance. Another \$226,453 is earmarked for the Offices "other services and charges" category.

It's a major jump from the \$192,500 appropriated for the same purpose in FY2024. Nikima Richards, OCB's Finance Specialist clarified that it's simply a realignment of funds. In FY2024, \$68,000 for projects including the re-tiling of their St. Croix was listed under the Office's capital outlay, instead of being listed under the "other services and charges" category. Senator Donna Frett-Gregory was bewildered by the decision not to address the issue sooner..

"What prevented you from coming to the Legislation [and] asking for a reauthorization? We could have done that last week," she said. Recalling the forecasted \$91 million deficit in revenue for FY2024, Senator Frett-Gregory emphasized the hesitancy of the Legislature to allocate funding that's not available. "It would be unfortunate [if] you lose the opportunity to get this done," she commented.

The possibility of not having access to funds for necessary renovations is not the OCB's only challenge, however. "The demands on the office are increasing," Ms. Springette told members of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance. She mentioned growing calls for training and advice from clients, even as the Office contends with insufficient staff. OCB's current team comprises six members and one attorney general from the V.I. Department of Justice. Among the list of seven vacancies is one for an assistant attorney general, a position newly established in April 2024.

Filling the position has been delayed by the need to create a job specification for the title, Ms. Springette testified. It's something that Frett-Gregory again found odd, particularly as the individual would be carrying out similar tasks to those conducted by the attorney from the Department of Justice. "You have employees with different titles, doing the same job...This is a potential issue that you're creating," she said. It's not clear whether the salary structure for the two roles would be as similar as their duties.

Ms. Springette explained that although the VIDOJ is legally obligated to assign two assistant attorneys general to the OCB, budget constraints have resulted in only one DOJ employee currently serving at the OCB. In response, Frett-Gregory suggested that instead of creating a new position within the OCB, it might be more effective to allocate the funds to the DOJ. This would enable the transfer of an additional assistant attorney general to support the OCB's operations. She stated, "That's what makes sense, and that's what avoids us having any challenges with employment issues."

The Office of Collective Bargaining, which has been the subject of [complaints by unions](#) regarding a [perennial backlog](#) in wage agreement negotiations, is currently managing a caseload of 325, said Ms. Springette. Of that number, 255 are rights arbitration cases and 31 relate to charges of unfair labor practices. Additionally, "OCB currently manages 32 collective bargaining agreements, of which eight are current.," Ms. Springette noted.