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BOC Spends \$76,160 Daily to House 238 Local Prisoners

High local inmate care costs due to deteriorating facilities, compounded by significant overtime expenses, prompt calls for budget conservatism

Senate / **Published On July 10, 2024 06:33 AM /**

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The John A. Bell Correctional Facility on St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The Bureau of Corrections revealed on Tuesday that it spends considerable sums to house local prisoners. According to Bureau Director Wynn Timermark, the daily cost currently stands at \$320 per inmate, equating to \$76,160 per day, or \$27.8 million annually for 238 inmates.

The high cost stands in stark contrast to the \$67 to \$85 per day spent on housing inmates off-island. BOC officials attribute the exorbitant local costs to deteriorating facilities that require

significant repairs and maintenance, as well as the necessity to ship in all supplies.

The costs were revealed during BOC's budget hearing in the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance meeting. There, Senator Samuel Carrion urged BOC officials to adopt a more conservative budget approach without compromising operations. He noted the lack of savings between their FY2024 and FY2025 budget requests. "You're just moving from one section to another," Carrion told Testamark.

For FY2025, the Bureau of Corrections is requesting a general fund appropriation of \$36,408,693, supplemented by \$2,291,094 in federal funds. Personnel costs account for \$13,892,534 of the general fund request, while fringe benefits amount to \$6,098,387. Vendor payments comprise the next highest portion of the BOC's budget, totaling \$16.4 million, with \$7.9 million allocated for housing and feeding off-island inmates. "This amount does not include health care costs for off-island inmates, which can add to the overall cost," Testamark reported.

The BOC currently houses 156 inmates in facilities in Florida, Virginia, and Mississippi, while 238 people are incarcerated locally. "All 394 prisoners in the Bureau's custody, including those housed off-island, must be fed, housed, transported, and cared for at the Bureau's expense," Testamark said.

Health care expenses added \$682,000 for inpatient and outpatient services in the first three quarters of FY2024, with \$232,000 spent on medical care for off-island inmates. Despite these high costs, the Bureau only receives \$100 per day from the federal government to house a detainee or prisoner, although this figure might soon change. "We're getting ready to go back into negotiation with them," Testamark noted, highlighting that the sum was a mere \$60 per day prior to her appointment.

The high cost of inmate care is further compounded by significant overtime expenses for corrections officers and staff. To date, the Bureau has spent \$3,697,621.86 on overtime and anticipates an additional \$1.5 million in expenses before FY2024 ends in three months. With a projection of over \$5.1 million in overtime payments within a year, lawmakers, including Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, expressed concern about the BOC's ability to reduce costs.

"We are continuing to staff the facility," Testamark said, despite only hiring one new corrections officer recruit this year. Budget constraints have forced the BOC to eliminate 32 previously budgeted vacancies, and it has lost 13 employees in FY2024. Transporting inmates to court, hospitals, and the mainland for mental health care significantly contributes to overtime expenses. "From the time they leave till the time they come back, they're on overtime which is at ... double time," Testamark explained.

In addition to personnel and fringe benefits costs, the BOC's budget includes \$300,000 for utilities and \$1,682,201 for supplies. This represents a reduction of approximately \$2 million compared to the previous year, attributed to one-time costs such as purchasing new vehicles in previous fiscal years.

Senator Frett-Gregory has requested a more detailed breakdown of the BOC's FY2025 budget to better understand their spending plan. This request has been made to several entities during this budget cycle as the committee works towards approving a budget that considers the territory's current revenue constraints.