

DLCA Seeks Additional Funding Amid Severe Staffing Shortages and Vendor Payment Delays

Amid fiscal challenges, DLCA seeks increased appropriations to address critical staffing needs and resolve \$357,600 in delayed payments to 51 vendors

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DLCA Commissioner Natalie Hodge By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

As the fiscal year 2025 approaches, the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs is grappling with significant staffing shortages, particularly in areas critical for regulatory oversight.

Currently, the department has 8 key vacancies, including the Director of Administrative and Business Management in the St. Thomas district and two alcohol inspectors. DLCA Commissioner Natalie Hodge during last Thursdays budget hearing highlighted the urgent need

for additional staff, especially enforcement officers, to manage the territory's 44 nightclubs effectively. "When you tell me you have 44 nightclubs in St. Thomas and nobody's working the night shift, you set yourself up," expressed Senator Dwayne DeGraff during budget discussions.

DLCA also faces challenges with delayed payments to vendors, owing \$357,600 to 51 vendors, which are at various stages of processing. This financial bottleneck adds to the operational hurdles of the department. To address these challenges, Ms. Hodge has requested a total budget of \$4,947,746 from the General Fund, along with \$2,079,296 from the Public Services Commission Revolving Fund and \$500,000 from the Consumer Protection Fund, with additional smaller appropriations from other sources. This request is \$669,002 less than their revised FY2024 budget of \$5,616,748, reflecting the financial constraints the department is navigating.

The requested sums from the General Fund, amounting to \$3,068,616.03, will primarily cover personnel costs, with an additional \$1,444,844.15 allocated for associated fringe benefits for 45 positions. DLCA's enforcement division, which currently includes a mere five officers, is deemed insufficient to handle the regulatory demands, especially during peak operating hours. Ms. Hodge proposed an additional \$50,000 for overtime and night differential to facilitate nighttime inspections, a critical component not included in their budget recommendation.

"Currently, the department's enforcement officers work until 5 pm... The additional hours will enable our staff to conduct thorough inspections and enforce regulations during peak operating hours for these establishments," said Ms. Hodge.

In terms of operational expenses, the department plans to spend \$7,000 on office supplies, \$194,000 on professional services, and \$1,001 on repairs and maintenance, among other costs. Despite the trimmed budget, DLCA officials said the department aims to continue its consumer protection efforts robustly, with the \$500,000 allocation from the Consumer Protection Fund slated for investigating and resolving customer disputes and funding public awareness campaigns.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory voiced concerns over DLCA's priorities and the urgency to accommodate critical responsibilities within the budget. "When we submit a budget, there are certain things that should be important to us in the territory, so why would we have a budget coming down to us that does not accommodate these types of responsibilities that are very critical to us?" she questioned, highlighting the need for a budget that aligns with the operational and regulatory demands of the department.