

Concerns Raised Over LEPC's Grant Delays and Inadequate Oversight on St. Croix Despite Office Rental Costs

Lawmakers express concerns about the V.I. Law Enforcement Planning Commission's slow grant disbursement, lack of permanent staff on St. Croix, and continued rent payments for an underutilized office, urging immediate action

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LEPC Director Moleto Smith. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The V.I. Law Enforcement Planning Commission is facing scrutiny for the slow pace of grant disbursement, inadequate monitoring on St. Croix due to a lack of staff, and paying rent on the island despite having no permanent employees stationed there. During a budget hearing on

Tuesday, lawmakers expressed concerns over these issues, with the commission's leadership acknowledging the challenges but offering reassurances that steps are being taken to address them.

Senator Marvin Blyden raised concerns about LEPC's ability to effectively distribute approximately \$13 million in grant funding to sub-grantees, given that the agency has been without a grants manager for about a year. Despite the reassurances that the hiring process is nearly complete, the delay in releasing some \$334,000 under the JAG program was noted. Lawmakers stressed the critical importance of timely fund disbursement, with some federal grants dating back to 2019 still unspent. "It's not a very good look," assessed Senator Novelle Francis.

Compounding these concerns is the LEPC's limited presence on St. Croix. The commission manages no staff in the district, despite paying annual rent for office space. Employees only visit the island twice a month, which has led to doubts about the agency's ability to effectively monitor grants in that area. "I don't know how well we're doing the true monitoring," Senator Donna Frett-Gregory remarked, despite assurances from LEPC Director Moletto Smith that oversight is being maintained. Senator Javan James encouraged St. Croix residents to apply for the vacant positions within the agency.

These issues were discussed as part of the LEPC's FY2025 budget request, which stands at \$859,167—a decrease from the previous year. The budget includes \$737,766 for personnel and fringe costs, covering nine positions. Despite the budget cut, Mr. Smith told lawmakers that the decrease should not significantly impact the agency's operations. However, the Legislature has requested a revised budget that accurately reflects personnel allocations, with warnings from Ms. Frett-Gregory that the current request may not be sufficient to fill the existing vacancies.