

Missed Deadlines and Costs Mount as St. Croix Waits for Long-Delayed Morgue

DOJ defends handling of modular morgue, but lawmakers question the mounting expenses and lack of action on the Toro site

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Nearly two years and several missed deadlines onwards, the St. Croix district remains without a morgue, forcing the Department of Justice to continue incurring costs to transport bodies to St. Thomas when autopsies are required. In 2024, \$49,650 has already been spent for that purpose, lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety learned.

On Tuesday, Attorney General nominee Gordon Rhea told lawmakers that the modular unit purchased last year to house the St. Croix morgue “has been stored at the Port Authority’s dock on St. Croix, where it sustained damage from the elements.” Still, the dock was described as a “secure” location, and replacement parts have been purchased for the damaged elements of the

mobile facility.

Although the unit was [supposed to have been in operation](#) since May 2023, it has remained on the docks because “at this stage, there really is no other place to put it,” Mr. Rhea said. VIDOJ is “currently working with the Department of Health on St. Croix to relocate the modular morgue to a secure lot owned by the Department of Health.”

They hope to complete negotiations in short order. “We're actually going to go out there and visit it later this week or next week to make final decisions,” noted Mr. Rhea. “It looks like we will be able to finally close this hole within two months.”?

The department’s decision to identify a new location for the mobile morgue piqued the interest of several lawmakers who were familiar with previous plans to place the modular facility on the Toro building site in Estate Orange Grove. “The Toro site is a very expensive operation, and it's going to be very long term,” explained Mr. Rhea, citing the DOJ’s preference to use the DOH location.?

Lawmakers, however, were concerned that the money spent to prepare the Toro site for the morgue had gone to waste. DOJ’s Chief Financial Officer, Kai Christiansen insisted that approximately \$2,000 was spent to seal the site for the foundation of the modular unit. Senators Kenneth Gittens and Franklin Johnson were less than convinced. “You had plumbing work done there, you had electrical work done there, and all of those things had to go inside of that foundation...No way that could be \$2,000,” countered Mr. Johnson.?

VIDOJ had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Juan F. Luis Hospital that allows the Medical Examiner’s Office to use JFL’s suite to perform autopsies while awaiting a morgue of their own. However, that space is also currently inoperable, “and the hospital cannot guarantee when necessary repairs will be completed.” The current arrangement involves transporting bodies between St. Croix and St. Thomas for autopsies. In 2022, VIDOJ disclosed that it [cost the state](#) \$1900 for each body transported in such a manner.

Mr. Johnson was not in favor of the DOJ’s memorandum of understanding with JFL. “The more use of that facility, the longer [it’s] going to take for them to take it down... It has to go down because what we have is temporary,” he argued. Emphasizing the importance of a morgue on St. Croix, he told Mr. Rhea that it “brings a lot of stress to family... Families [are] delayed in having the burial of their loved one.”

“Solving St. Croix’s lack of a functioning autopsy suite ranks high among my priorities,” Mr. Rhea told lawmakers. He is scheduled to defend his nomination as attorney general before the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Thursday.