

Image not found or type unknown

Gordon Rhea Pledges Reforms in Attorney General Hearing, Secures Senate Support

Attorney general nominee Gordon Rhea highlights his vision for reform, including diversion programs for nonviolent offenders, tackling public corruption, and digitizing the Department of Justice

Government / **Published On September 13, 2024 05:48 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **September 13, 2024**

Image not found or type unknown



Attorney General Nominee Gordon Rhea By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Gordon Rhea's extensive experience and contributions to the legal landscape in the USVI were used to justify the nomination of the career attorney as the newest Attorney General to lead the Department of Justice. He appeared before the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Thursday as a first step to formalizing his new designation.?

Mr. Rhea is the second individual to be nominated for the role of attorney general in the 35th Legislature following [Ariel Smith's resignation](#) in March 2024. After Governor Albert Bryan [confirmed Mr. Rhea's nomination](#), the Tennessee native with over forty years of legal experience assumed the duties of the Attorney General's Office on May 20th. He testified that his first week was spent meeting with key team members in both districts, "inviting them to tell me what was working well, to identify any problem areas and to give me their best assessment of how to improve."

The "big picture issue," noted Mr. Rhea, surrounds the "lack of coordination among the departments and agencies responsible for law enforcement and justice," including the Virgin Islands Police Department, United States Attorney's Office, Federal Investigation Bureau and local courts. Since his appointment, Mr. Rhea said he has met with the top brass of VIPD to forge a better way forward.

"We've identified several areas where closer cooperation between the Police Department and our Criminal Division can reap large rewards," he reported. The two entities have already identified plans including facilitating visits by prosecutors to crime scenes to better understand the facts before trying the matter in court.?

Mr. Rhea has also met with Chief Territorial Officer Julie Todman-Smith and V.I. Superior Court judges to discuss "expanding the use of diversion programs and probation for nonviolent or youthful offenders," thereby offering them the "opportunity to avoid the lifetime stigma of a criminal conviction." "Such dispositions help unclog judicial calendars, give prosecutors more time to focus on violent and repeat criminal offenders," noted the acting attorney general.

It's a proposal that moved Senator Carla Joseph to tears, as she reflected on an incident where a former student was nearly jailed for a non-violent marijuana offense as a young man. "The attorney general wanted him to go to jail for just some weed, and I could never understand it," she said, and told Mr. Rhea that she was "elated" about his perspective.

?Walking the halls of the V.I. Department of Justice for the past four months, Mr. Rhea has identified dire staffing shortages. The White Collar Crime and Public Corruption Unit - whose work interested Senator Angel Bolques - is understaffed. The Civil Division, who Mr. Rhea says "has done a spectacular job over the past two years bringing in 10s of millions of dollars in settlements" would also profit from more attorneys. The acting AG is working with VIDOJ's human resources department "to attract talented new employees and find ways to fund their employment."

The Special Investigation Division, responsible for issuing subpoenas and warrants, is also "thinly manned." With more people, Mr. Rhea said the SID could help local law enforcement crack down on tax evasion and other such crimes.

Staff training and a new digital case management system have also been identified as crucial needs for the Department of Justice. A new system would "eliminate the need for paper files, expedite the exchange of data with the police." He is working to "have it in place within a year." The [St. Croix morgue](#), too, is a priority for Mr. Rhea, as he outlined before the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety on Tuesday.

?Since accepting the nomination for acting attorney general, Mr. Rhea has recused himself from matters that could ultimately become conflicts of interest. Of note, Mr. Rhea has separated himself from any matters relating to a [lawsuit settled last year](#) by banking giant JP Morgan, linked to Jeffrey Epstein's crimes in the territory. The recusal came because the current attorney general

nominee previously served as local counsel for Richard Khan, who worked as Epstein's accountant and was one of two co-executors of his estate. "I have never met, communicated with or represented Mr. Epstein, and I am as shocked and disgusted by his conduct as I believe we all are," said Mr. Rhea.

Deputy Assistant Attorney General Ian Clement is now tasked with all decisions in all Epstein-related cases. This, said Mr. Rhea, will ensure "there could be no whiff that I might have a conflict of interest or any bias."?

"You don't need this job, but I believe the people need you right now," stated Senator Marise James. Lawmakers, though confident in Mr. Rhea's experience, skill, and willingness to serve, wanted more detail on his plans to tackle several key issues. For Senator Angel Bolques, it was financial crimes and public corruption. "If any government officials are caught doing anything illegal or corrupt, I will prosecute it. There's no question about that and I've made that clear," was Mr. Rhea's promise.

Mr. Rhea has promised to represent the people of the Virgin Islands with the "same zeal, dedication and commitment to justice" as he did for his private clients. "This is a chance for me to do good," he said. Staff at the Department of Justice have touted Mr. Rhea's contributions to date, alluding to a positive change in office culture since his arrival. Ultimately, the seven committee members present on Thursday voted in favor of his appointment.