

## Lawmakers Float Off-Island Inmate Transfers to Cut Skyrocketing Local Housing Costs

**With local inmate housing costs at \$321/day versus \$103 on the mainland, lawmakers asked if relocating prisoners could ease budget pressure. BOC Director Wynn Timer Testamark warned of family separation and the limits of federal detainee policies.**

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**Aerial shot of the John A. Bell Adult Correctional Facility, also known as the Golden Grove Correctional Facility on St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.**

During the V.I. Bureau of Corrections' FY2026 budget request before the Senate on Wednesday, a pressing question emerged: should the Virgin Islands consider relocating more inmates to mainland facilities to curb rising costs? With the daily expense of housing a local inmate more

than triple that of stateside detention, some lawmakers are now openly questioning whether fiscal realities should outweigh long-standing concerns about family separation and rehabilitation.

At the heart of the conversation was BOC's \$37.7 million general fund budget request, with an additional \$1.6 million anticipated through federal grants. The budget includes \$15.6 million for personnel costs and \$6.6 million for fringe benefits, covering 222 positions—of which 61 remain vacant. Another \$13 million is allocated for “other services,” while \$1.9 million is earmarked for supplies and \$600,000 for utilities.

Director Wynn Testamark described the request as a “strategic investment in safety, rehabilitation and human dignity,” but lawmakers zeroed in on areas where costs appear unsustainable—particularly housing and staffing.

Testamark revealed that as of June 16, overtime expenditures had reached \$2.9 million. Last fiscal year, the Bureau paid out \$4.9 million in overtime, largely due to staff shortages and off-island inmate transport. “Overtime is accrued when a corrections officer accompanies individuals that have to be transported off island...Once the officer leaves the territory, they're on overtime until they get back,” she explained.

While the BOC continues to pursue new hires—14 applicants were deemed eligible as of February, though only three passed or were waived through the exam—recruitment remains a major hurdle. “Either they don't pass the test or they don't pass the background, so that's a challenge,” Testamark told senators. Three applicants failed outright, six didn't show up for the exam, and only two remain in the “pipeline.”

Chair of the Committee, Senator Novelle Francis, urged the BOC to explore using federal funds for overtime payments, which are currently paid entirely from the general fund. “It would offset the general fund from paying overtime,” he said.

But it was the skyrocketing cost of local inmate housing that prompted the most intense discussion. According to Testamark, the daily cost of housing an inmate on-island is approximately \$321, compared to just \$103 for those held off-island. The Bureau currently houses 160 inmates in mainland facilities—most in Mississippi—compared to 191 inmates held locally. Federal detainees, meanwhile, bring in \$100 per day through an agreement with the U.S. Marshal Service, though the Bureau is “in negotiation to increase it,” said Testamark.

“Is it better for us to ship our people off-island to reduce costs, knowing that we may be facing some real tightening of the belts?” asked Senator Carla Joseph. She acknowledged the suggestion was “controversial” but framed it as fiscally responsible.

Testamark responded with caution. “We want to keep the family unit connected,” she said, emphasizing BOC's focus on rehabilitation and reducing recidivism. “In reality, we don't want to. We try our best not to separate that connection.”

Senator Hubert Frederick was more direct. “We're at the point as a government, it's all about dollars and cents now,” he said. “We're responsible to make sure we don't go bankrupt because something costs three times...Why can't we send them away so we could save some money and focus on the other issues?”

Yet as Testamark pointed out, the majority of local inmates are detainees awaiting court hearings. “They cannot be sent to stateside facilities,” she said, reiterating that many decisions are dictated by legal status, not cost alone.

Senator Kenneth Gittens offered a different concern. “I want to see us doing a bit more to keep our inmates here locally,” he said, warning that sending inmates to mainland prisons could expose them to gang recruitment and other dangers. He agreed with Testamark that maintaining family ties and local support systems is important to long-term rehabilitation.

Beyond housing costs, the Bureau is also facing rising healthcare expenses. In FY2024, the BOC spent \$823,000 on local and off-island inmate medical care. That figure has already ballooned to \$1.1 million this fiscal year—with three months still to go. Of that amount, \$836,000 has been spent on local care alone, already exceeding the previous year’s total.

Testamark noted that a portion of the increase is due to payments made toward outstanding balances owed to local hospitals. “\$32,000 represents payments made to Juan F. Luis for current invoices in fiscal year 2025,” she testified. “No settlement has [been] reached for possible outstanding bills.” She also reported that \$163,000 was paid toward FY2024 obligations, while \$576,000 went toward a finalized settlement with Schneider Regional Medical Center.

The Bureau’s financial pressures extend beyond medical care. BOC currently owes approximately \$2.5 million to various vendors. However, Testamark assured lawmakers that these unpaid debts—submitted to the Department of Finance—have not disrupted operations or service delivery.