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## Justice Department Cites Burnout and Low Morale in Budget Pitch as Senators Question Salaries and Turnover

**As the DOJ requests \$18.8M in general funds, Attorney General Rhea warns of widespread burnout and difficulty retaining attorneys. Lawmakers questioned whether salary is the real issue, pointing to six-figure pay and persistent staff departures.**

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The V.I. Department of Justice on Wednesday made a case not only for its \$18.8 million general fund request, but also for urgent staffing relief amid what Attorney General Gordon Rhea described as widespread burnout, low morale, and recruitment struggles tied to uncompetitive

salaries. While the request reflects a modest increase over last year's appropriation, lawmakers were left grappling with whether higher pay alone could fix what some called a revolving door in the department's ranks.

Mr. Rhea appeared before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance to provide a breakdown of the budget request. The department intends to spend \$10,375,145 on personnel expenses, with another \$3,875,684 on fringe benefits. This includes 64 positions, including 10 current vacancies. Supplies are expected to cost \$302,344, while other services are budgeted at \$3,907,843. The VIDOJ will set aside \$294,200 for utilities. The requested allocation from the general fund will be supplemented by \$12,967,536 in federal funds, VIDOJ says, for a total FY2026 budget of \$31,722,752.

The request represents an increase of \$210,754 or 1% over the FY2025 budget. Despite the increase, "this budget presents significant challenges for the department to fulfill its constitutional and organic responsibilities," Mr. Rhea testified.

The need for increased staffing stands out as one of the DOJ's primary struggles. According to the attorney general's testimony, "St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John criminal divisions each need four additional prosecutors, additional litigation assistance, and victim advocates to handle their massive caseloads." Additionally, "the Civil Division also requires two more attorneys, and the Solicitor General's division is four lawyers short."



*V.I. Attorney General Gordon Rhea, center, at the Senate on June 18, 2025. (Credit: V.I. Legislature)*

Insufficient personnel “leaves them exhausted and stressed, undermining their morale and risks inducing them to leave,” noted Mr. Rhea. An American Rescue Plan Act grant of \$2,485,420 was initially awarded to the VIDOJ and was expected to fund 22 positions for two years. However, “to our dismay, this amount was de-obligated,” Mr. Rhea reported. Senator Novelle Francis, the committee’s chair, was concerned about potentially waning morale within the department.

“The big positive morale issue is that a lot of things are happening that we’ve needed to have happen for a long time,” Mr. Rhea replied. However, that does not negate the fact that “a lot of our attorneys are just feeling massively overworked.” It is Mr. Rhea’s assessment that “we just don’t have people” and staff are “hitting burnout.”

It is apparent that these staff shortages will continue until the DOJ can scrape together hundreds of thousands more in annual funding. According to the department’s chief financial officer, Kai

Christopher, “the cost of filling all the assistant attorney general [positions] would be pretty much about \$800,000.”

For Senator Kenneth Gittens, the department needs to be “aggressive in hiring these people.” It’s an approach that Attorney General Rhea says they have adopted. However, “people aren’t coming. They feel our salaries are too low, which we can’t control,” he offered as an explanation.

“Obviously, the state-side salaries are very often much higher,” Mr. Rhea later told Senator Marise James. “Even down here, though, private practice can make you more money than working for the Department of Justice. There’s no question about that.” The VIDOJ has also learned that “some of the salaries paid by the Public Defender are higher” than those within its agency.

Though comforted by the fact that legal professionals who accept the salary are “motivated by wanting to help the community,” Mr. Rhea remains aware that “higher salaries would certainly make us much more attractive to a wider range of the potential legal field.”

“The topic of salaries is such a very touchy subject, so I’m going to leave it at that,” said Sen. James, thanking the attorneys for their service.

Senator Kurt Violet was less forgiving. “I’m seeing Assistant Attorney General \$115,000. Next one: \$140,000, \$132,000, \$121,000, \$139,000, \$142,000. Are these the low salaries you’re referring to?” he asked the attorney general. According to Mr. Rhea, the salary depends on “how long someone has been barred.”

“There must be some component that isn’t working out as to why we’re able to attract but we’re not able to sustain those individuals in the position for a long period of time,” Mr. Violet noted. He referenced the “revolving door” of attorneys general over the past few years. “I’m trying to see if individuals are just scared to become a criminal attorney in the Virgin Islands... Because \$142,000 ain’t too bad at all, but these individuals are still leaving.”

“It’s not like we’re paying so low that it’s not worth coming here and work,” added Senator Hubert Frederick, who had reviewed starting salaries in at least one other jurisdiction. “So I don’t know if it’s pay... It’s a beautiful place to come and live, and go to the beach and all that good stuff. Maybe we should try recruiting out of Idaho or Nebraska or something,” he suggested.

“Your agency gets paid more than any... I have no problems giving you more money, but you have to justify it by showing us that we could save more money,” Frederick concluded.