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## DLCA Faces Pressure to Boost Penalties and Collections Amid Staffing Gaps

**Lawmakers called on the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs to impose tougher penalties and resolve staffing shortages after reports showed low fine collection and weak enforcement efforts, with just \$16,800 recovered from \$86,600 in citations.**

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**Nathalie Hodge, DLCA commissioner. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.**

With enforcement revenues falling short, lawmakers on Wednesday urged the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs (DLCA) to impose stiffer fines and improve its collections during a budget hearing before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance.

“It seems as if you're assessing more or less in the \$1,000 range, and it seems to me as if that's low,” remarked Senator Marise James, who emphasized the need for penalties significant enough to deter misconduct. DLCA Commissioner Natalie Hodge responded that a legislative fix may be required. “Where we're falling short is the person to pursue the collections, like a collector,” she said, adding that an online mechanism is in the works to help address the issue.

Senator Avery Lewis is currently working on legislation aimed at increasing fine amounts, according to Ms. Hodge.

The call for stronger enforcement and penalty collection came as Commissioner Hodge presented DLCA's FY2026 budget request, which totals \$5,871,053 from the General Fund and \$800,000 from the Consumer Protection Fund. The General Fund request reflects a \$973,073.53 increase over the FY2025 allocation.

DLCA data showed that between October and May, the Consumer Protection Unit issued 16 non-compliance citations totaling \$86,600. In the same period, 168 cases were resolved, with recoveries amounting to just over \$16,800. That pace did not impress lawmakers. “We're losing money,” said Sen. James, stressing that current fines lack teeth.

Citing inadequate staffing as a barrier to robust enforcement, Commissioner Hodge highlighted six vacancies within the department, including one enforcement officer position. Currently, there are only two enforcement officers and one chief on St. Croix, and two officers on St. Thomas. The Weights and Measures Division is similarly strained, with only one inspector and one chief inspector on St. Croix, and one inspector and senior inspector on St. Thomas. An inspector is especially needed for St. Croix, while the new enforcement officer is planned for St. Thomas.

“A strong field presence of inspectors and investigators is essential to boosting the public confidence in DLCA, and deterring unlicensed or non-compliant business practices,” Ms. Hodge told lawmakers.

Senator Hubert Frederick also expressed concern over the shortage, stating that inspectors were vital “to assure that they're not selling whatever to our people and getting them sick.”

To support increased after-hours enforcement, the department is requesting \$50,000 for overtime and nighttime differential pay.

Meanwhile, the Weights and Measures Unit issued 51 citations for expired products, totaling \$65,850 in fines, with \$6,460 collected to date. The Division of Enforcement issued 174 citations totaling \$100,550 in fines, including two arrests tied to licensing violations. Summonses amounting to \$65,426 have been issued, and \$29,090 has been collected by violators looking to avoid the department's monthly enforcement hearings.

Senator Franklin Johnson was blunt in his assessment. “Your collection is very low,” he said. “If I'm violating you and you're not collecting your money, what's going to happen?” Ms. Hodge pledged improvement. “Hopefully for next year's budget testimony, you would see the difference,” she said, noting that unresolved cases are being referred to DLCA's legal counsel.

In addition to enforcement challenges, DLCA is asking for reinstatement of funding for a public information officer, a position that has remained vacant for an extended period and was subsequently defunded. Commissioner Hodge is requesting \$70,000 for the role, proposing a 50/50 cost-share with the Office of Cannabis Regulation. The absence of a PIO, she said, has limited DLCA's ability to handle media relations, public education, and crisis communications.

Senator Novelle Francis, who chairs the committee, suggested the department formally share the necessary information so the Legislature can ensure proper appropriation “at the correct position and the correct salary.”

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