

Domestic Violence and Eviction Cases Rise 25% in USVI as Immigration Issues Add Strain on Legal Services

Legal Services of the Virgin Islands reported a 25% rise in domestic violence and eviction cases, many with immigration ties, while seeking \$2M in funding. Leaders warned that staffing shortages and low salaries limit their ability to meet rising demand.

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Attorneys from Legal Services of the Virgin Islands (LSVI) told lawmakers this week that their office is managing a higher number of domestic violence and eviction cases, noting the trend while presenting their \$2 million budget request before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance.

According to Damion Sanders, LSVI's territory-wide litigation director, the organization is currently handling about 1,400 cases. Within that total, evictions have risen from about 35–45 cases to 45–55 cases, while domestic violence matters have increased from roughly 10–15 cases to 20–25 cases. Sanders estimated the overall growth in both areas to be around 25 percent.

Committee chair Senator Novelle Francis expressed concern at the uptick. Sanders agreed the development is troubling. "With respect to the domestic violence, it's very concerning because there's a reverberating effect," he explained.

He added that many of the cases now carry an immigration component. Individuals who migrate to the Virgin Islands and are in the process of seeking citizenship are particularly vulnerable, Sanders noted. "Their partner has a power control leverage as a result of their immigration status," he said. LSVI, therefore, intervenes on multiple fronts in such cases, providing assistance in domestic violence, immigration, and related family matters.

These interventions require additional resources, Sanders stressed, and Senator Francis pledged further discussion with LSVI to explore how the Legislature might support funding needs for such work.

LSVI provides free civil legal services to low-income residents, the elderly, victims of domestic violence, and other disadvantaged groups. Executive Director Shelby King Gaddy told lawmakers that the \$2,007,700 budget request for the upcoming fiscal year would only allow her team to maintain the "status quo." Still, she assured the committee that staff remain committed to meeting the "growing demand for our assistance."

Currently, the organization is facing difficulties filling attorney vacancies, which King Gaddy attributed to LSVI's position as a public interest law firm. She explained that salaries offered by LSVI are not competitive with those available in central government or private practice.

To offset this, King Gaddy has sought to combine roles and incorporate technology to ease the workload. However, staffing needs remain, including a managing attorney and a junior staff attorney for the St. Thomas office.

Senator Kurt Vialet asked whether LSVI had considered how much additional funding would be necessary to increase salaries. King Gaddy replied that the organization is being cautious. "We're looking for how we can sustain the rates if we bump everybody up, and then we don't have the funding," she explained.

She added that financial constraints were the reason the organization opted to hire junior attorneys rather than senior staff: "so that we could afford and continue to sustain their pay."