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## DOJ's One-Person Public Corruption Unit Investigating Up to 10 Cases; Criminal Filings Could Come Within Weeks

**Attorney General Gordon Rhea says the DOJ is investigating eight to ten matters involving alleged abuse of public funds by officials or contractors, while its one-person corruption unit prepares cases that could lead to criminal filings within weeks.**

Government / **Published On July 10, 2026 05:29 AM /**

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ST. THOMAS — Criminal charges related to government corruption could be filed within the coming weeks, Attorney General Gordon Rhea told lawmakers Thursday, as the V.I. Department of Justice investigates eight to ten matters involving the alleged abuse of public funds by public officials or contractors.

The potential filings come as the department's White Collar Crime and Public Corruption Unit operates with only one employee — its director — despite what Mr. Rhea described as increasingly complex financial investigations.

"I believe that there will be some criminal filings in the next couple of weeks on cases related to government corruption," Mr. Rhea said during a hearing of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance. He was unable to commit to a specific timeline.

"My understanding is [that we] are almost to the end of the investigation and that charging is becoming imminent in the next few weeks," he told Senator Kenneth Gittens.

The DOJ has 44 open cases across both districts, lawmakers learned during the hearing.

Mr. Gittens questioned whether the department was treating public corruption with sufficient urgency when the unit responsible for investigating such cases has only a director. He urged the DOJ to make public corruption in the territory a priority.

Mr. Rhea said he hopes to increase staffing within the unit, particularly as "financial crimes grow in sophistication."

Until additional employees can be hired, the department is relying on its collaboration with federal authorities and the V.I. Police Department to advance investigations.

"What I'm planning on doing is trying to shift some of our funding so we can get some more people...to do that kind of work and be concentrated solely on it...It's a lot of work and those kinds of offenses can get extremely complex," Mr. Rhea told Senator Ray Fonseca.

Staffing shortages extend well beyond the White Collar Crime and Public Corruption Unit and were raised repeatedly during Thursday's budget hearing.

The DOJ's Criminal Division currently has eight attorneys, four support staff members and two victim advocates. The division needs three additional attorneys, three more support employees and another victim advocate to avoid "serious delays in processing cases," according to the department.

Additional resources "would enhance the Division's ability to further reduce case backlogs..." Mr. Rhea said.

The Medicaid Fraud Control Unit is investigating nine cases involving allegations of Medicaid fraud, unlicensed practice, false claims and financial exploitation.

"Currently investigations involve potential losses and recoveries exceeding \$2.5 million," Mr. Rhea said.

However, "continued staffing shortages place additional burdens on existing personnel" and may affect the unit's capacity to "pursue emerging fraud schemes and protect vulnerable Medicaid beneficiaries."

More employees are also needed in the Civil Divisions, which represent the executive branch and all government departments, boards and commissions.

"This massive workload is carried by a remarkably dedicated yet small team of three attorneys on St. Thomas and two on St. Croix..." Mr. Rhea said.

For the divisions to “operate at its absolute peak”, he said additional funding is needed for expert analysts, electronic data systems, mediations and general litigation expenses.

Staffing shortages are similarly affecting the Special Investigations Division and the Office of the Medical Examiner.

According to Mr. Rhea, the Medical Examiner’s Office needs “additional staff and specialized training to strengthen operations in both districts.”

The territory has only one contracted medical examiner, who is currently on sick leave. Mr. Rhea said a “former medical examiner has agreed to return temporarily to help maintain continuity of services.”

The DOJ is interviewing candidates for the position as it prepares to install a morgue on St. Croix “within the next month.” All autopsies are currently conducted on St. Thomas.

“I’m acutely aware of the vacancies that we do have, the need for more people, and the fact that a lot of my employees there are working basically day and night, and under tremendous pressure,” Mr. Rhea told Committee Chairman Senator Novelle Francis.

The attorney general acknowledged that the department’s need for additional resources could affect employee morale. He expressed hope that ongoing interviews would allow the DOJ to “be able to close that gap.”

The department hired 12 people during fiscal year 2026, while six employees separated from the DOJ.

Mr. Rhea told lawmakers that he wants to prioritize local applicants because they are “familiar with local ways, local culture, and with the island itself.” However, many of the department’s applicants “are from Alaska and places like that.”

Virgin Islanders who attend law school on the mainland are likely to remain there, he observed.

Funding for 20 vacant positions is included in the department’s fiscal year 2027 budget request.

The DOJ is requesting \$18,786,275 from the General Fund, including \$10,812,304 for personnel and \$4,445,418 for fringe benefits. Another \$291,101 is allocated for fringe benefits, while \$2,943,252 is designated for other services.

Utilities are budgeted at \$294,200, while no funding has been set aside for capital outlay. The General Fund appropriation would be supplemented by \$7,283,536 in federal funding.

Despite a 1.4 percent increase in the department’s General Fund allocation, Mr. Rhea warned lawmakers that “this budget presents significant challenges for the Department to fulfil its Constitutional and organic responsibilities.”