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Governor's Office Seeks \$14.38 Million as Proposed \$300,000 Inauguration Budget and \$135,000 Bryan Documentary Draw Scrutiny

The Office of the Governor seeks \$14.38 million for FY2027, including \$300,000 for inaugural activities, while senators questioned a \$135,000 documentary contract and pressed officials over deep cuts to healthcare technology and digital records systems.

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Kevin Williams, chief of staff in the Office of the Governor, testifies before the Legislature on Thursday during the Office of the Governor's FY2027 budget hearing. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

The Office of the Governor is seeking an overall FY2027 budget of \$14,376,600, including \$300,000 for the incoming administration's inaugural activities, as lawmakers questioned the cost of a documentary on Governor Albert Bryan Jr.'s tenure and challenged a reduction in funding for the Office of Health Information Technology.

Chief of Staff Kevin Williams presented the budget Thursday before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance.

The proposal includes a General Fund request of \$12,641,600. Of that amount, \$11,008,099 is allocated to the Office of the Governor, \$917,368 to the Bureau of Economic Research and \$716,133 to the Office of Gun Violence Prevention.

The office is also requesting \$1,435,000 for miscellaneous and special activities and \$300,000 from the Tourism Revolving Fund.

Inauguration Allocation Increased to \$300,000

The miscellaneous and special activities request includes what Mr. Williams described as a "modest increase for the upcoming inaugural activities from \$250,000 to \$300,000 due to rising inflation."

Committee Chairman Novelle Francis questioned how the administration arrived at the \$300,000 figure and whether a formula had been used.

"We know you can't put on the same calibre of event with that same amount of money. So we added the extra \$50,000 to be able to support the incoming administration," Mr. Williams said, again attributing the increase to inflation.

Mr. Williams said the overall FY2027 proposal "reflects a \$10,894 decrease."

Senator Hubert Frederick said the reduction did not demonstrate sufficient cost restraint by the executive branch. "We still haven't done anything in this budget to show us that the Executive branch is trying to restrain costs," he stated.

Mr. Frederick compared the governor's budget with the financial constraints facing the Judicial Branch. "They were complaining that they didn't have enough money because they're being held at a cap that's not reasonable," he told Mr. Williams. "Is there anywhere we could ask for some more leniency on your budget so we could help out the Judicial branch?" he asked.

Mr. Williams rejected the suggestion that the Office of the Governor should surrender part of its allocation. "We are a separate, co-equal branch of government," he said.

He maintained that the office has "done a good job of living within our budget," including absorbing salary increases while submitting a slightly reduced request.

OHIT Funding Falls From \$400,000 to \$250,000

Mr. Williams acknowledged that operating within the budget ceiling required sacrifices, particularly at the Office of Health Information Technology. "We're skimping on that, and I don't think we should skimp on that," Mr. Williams lamented.

OHIT is requesting \$250,000 for FY2027, down from the \$400,000 it received for FY2026.

Mr. Williams said the reduction “limits the Office’s ability to sustain and expand critical healthcare modernization efforts.”

During the current fiscal year, OHIT has “administered more than \$700,000 in federal funding” and “invested \$330,000 in specialized expertise to expand the Virgin Islands Health Information Exchange...” he said.

In FY2027, the office plans to focus on establishing a Health Data Utility intended to “provide permanent governance, accountability, and sustainable funding for [the] health information exchange.”

Mr. Williams appealed for additional local funding, saying it would “allow OHIT to strengthen provider support and grant management.”

The additional money would support personnel recruitment, continued operation of the Health Information Exchange, territory-wide Electronic Health Record planning and other initiatives.

OHIT Director Michelle Francis told lawmakers that her office needs substantially more than the \$250,000 included in the governor’s proposal.

“I am asking for, actually, a budget of \$807,000 to address the totality of what OHIT has done. We’ve proven that, though small, we’ve been a very good steward of local and federal funds,” said Michelle Francis, the director of OHIT.

Mr. Francis said he would highlight the request for consideration during the committee’s budget markup process.

Senator Kurt Vialet questioned why the Office of the Governor had not included sufficient funding for OHIT in its original proposal.

“This budget send down from Government House. Why you recommend \$250,000 for an entity that seems to be performing?” he asked Mr. Williams.

Mr. Williams said one factor was a change in the cost-sharing requirements for some federal grants, from a 75-25 split to an even 50-50 division.

The office was also directed to “live within your budget ceiling,” he said.

Mr. Vialet responded that Government House has authority over the budget ceilings established for executive agencies.

“The OMB director sends it up to Government House, and if Government House know that this Health Information System is doing such a wonderful job, then you say increase the ceiling,” he stated.

Like Mr. Francis, Mr. Vialet said he would consider increasing OHIT’s allocation.

Bryan Administration Documentary Contracted for \$135,000

Senator Milton Potter questioned whether the contract for a documentary chronicling the Bryan administration had been competitively procured.

Mr. Williams said nine entities responded to the solicitation. Media One Productions submitted the most competitive proposal at \$135,000, while the highest bid was “over \$1 million.”

The Office of the Governor has paid \$45,000 under the contract, and another invoice for \$60,000 is pending.

“We're halfway completed with the project,” Mr. Williams said.

The Office of the Governor is also planning several capital improvements before the Bryan administration leaves office. “We want to make sure that when we leave, that we turn over a facility that is ready to a new tenant coming in,” Mr. Williams said.

The proposed FY2027 budget includes \$295,000 for capital outlay.

The money would be used to replace “major office equipment,” purchase one new vehicle and complete “generator and air conditioning repairs at Government House on St. Croix.”

Minor renovations are also needed at the Government House facility at the Battery on St. John.