

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Justice Working On Establishing Forensic Lab

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ST. THOMAS -- "This is the first time in the history of the Virgin Islands that the Department of Justice has a facility of this kind."

So said Attorney General Claude Earl Walker during brief remarks Wednesday morning at a ceremony to unveil plans for the Department of Justice's forensic facility on St. Thomas, according V.I. D.O.J.'s Public Media Officer Corliss Smithen. The Consortium was present for the press conference, which was held at the facility here, and the publication will have video footage of the event Thursday morning.

The facility, which includes a morgue for the medical examiner, will be housed in the building formerly known as Creque's Funeral Home located at 1A-11 Beltjen Gade.

Mr. Walker said the facility will also be used for other areas of forensic science when it becomes fully operational.

"It will be used as training for local law enforcement officers in areas such as anatomy and mechanism of injuries, methods of collecting evidence, such as blood specimens, tissues, hair fibers, narcotics testing and DNA analysis for identification," Mr. Walker said.

Speaking on the matter of training, Mr. Walker said the Department of Justice is dedicated to train young people who are interested in the field of forensic science.

"One of the first things that Gov. Mapp has tasked Director Hunt and me to do," Mr. Walker said, "is to immediately set up a DOJ forensic science cadet program, whereby young people in the community who are interested in this field, may apply for the opportunity to work side by side with Dr. Landron and Dr. Hunt, both of whom have considerable experience in this area."

AG Walker said it will take a considerable amount of time and money to "put together the pieces of forensic science," but was confident that the morgue will be up and running very shortly. The morgue, according to AG Walker, will significantly benefit the Virgin Islands.

"For too long," AG Walker said in his prepared remarks, "the Virgin Islands has had to send forensic evidence off island and this practice has been very costly financially. In addition, too often, we have to wait a very long time to receive the results, causing significant delays in the administration of justice. We have had cases where defendants had to wait for a lengthy period to clear their names and this undue delay affects victims as well... So, this facility will be of great help to us in some areas of the forensic science by allowing us to process certain important evidence in a timelier manner.... So, at the Department of Justice, we continue to make giant leaps forward."

Director of Forensic for the Department of Justice Anthony Hunt further explained that there are certain changes that have to be made to get the facility up to standard and to meet the criteria for accreditation.

"There is a company that does medical facilities and we've been consulting with them, so we're on track to do it and do it right," Hunt said. "We don't have everything; we have a lot of the equipment ... We have identified the places to get equipment and the type of equipment to be utilized. There are national association accreditations for medical examiners, specifically for forensics and the facilities. We're going to go in stages. As this building opens up, it might not be accredited, but it will be to a standard that's acceptable."

Medical Examiner Dr. Francisco Landron, who has worked here since 1994, described this development as "a great moment in the history of forensic sciences in the Virgin Islands."

"With this new facility, we're going to have forensic investigators, a morgue and all the equipment here and little by little, we're going to start incorporating a system here so that we can provide a quality medical and legal investigation... that is adequate for the justice system."

Meanwhile, Mr. Walker used the occasion to formally introduce the medical examiner for St. Croix, Dr. Jacqueline Pender, who will begin working in the next several months.

“I’m so excited to be part of your team,” Dr. Pender said via telephone.

A similar facility will also be established on St. Croix. Both forensic facilities have been established by an act of the legislature.

“The legislature has found that it is important for the Virgin Islands to have its own forensic crime laboratory and that is why the legislature passed Act No. 7810 providing funding for the establishment of this facility,” Mr. Walker said

Feature Image: From left to right: Dr. Francisco Landron, medical examiner; former senator, Cleone Creque; Attorney General Claude Earl Walker; Director of Forensic at DOJ Anthony Hunt. (Credit: VIC)