

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Woes At Territory's Prisons Are Overwhelming; Director Nominee Calls For New Facilities

VIC News / **Published On March 28, 2019 12:35 PM /**

Staff **March 28, 2019**



The problems at the territory's correctional facilities are so overwhelming that Bureau of Corrections Direction Nominee, Wynn Timermark, said new buildings are badly needed, which she said would save money in the long run.

But the buildings were not the only problem, Ms. Timermark told lawmakers Wednesday as she gave the gloomy outlook during a Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety hearing. There, the director nominee detailed the woes of the facilities, including deterioration, low morale among staff, a severely understaffed bureau, and a mental health crisis that sees patients being indefinitely imprisoned at the facilities not because they were charged with crimes, but because the territory has no place to house

them.

"These areas of concern are all interrelated. Deteriorating and dangerous facilities prevent full compliance with the federal consent decrees and lead to low morale among the staff, which makes it harder to recruit and retain qualified correctional professionals. These challenges have been years in the making and cannot be solved overnight with quick fixes. Ultimately, we will need to build new facilities on St. Thomas and St. Croix. This will save money in the long term," Ms. Testamark said.

She added, "We need a fresh approach to the way we think about corrections. We cannot have an effective, functioning criminal justice system without providing correctional facilities that are safe, secure, and humane. If the conditions of confinement at our prisons do not meet even minimum constitutional standards, then our police, prosecutors, and judges will eventually be hampered in their work.



Golden Grove Correctional Facility, St. Croix (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

The director nominee revealed that the bureau currently houses 192 inmates locally -- 88 at the Alexander A. Farrelly Criminal Justice Complex on St. Thomas, and 104 at the

Golden Grove Adult Correctional Facility on St. Croix. "In addition to these, the Bureau pays between \$12 million and \$15 million a year to house 179 inmates in off-island correctional facilities on the U.S. mainland," she said.

Ms. Testamark revealed that out of the 88 inmates at the St. Thomas Jail, 43 are being held in pre-trial detention awaiting trial for local crimes; 20 have been convicted and sentenced; and 16 are federal pre-trial detainees who the Bureau houses at the request of the federal Marshal, for a fee. "There are 29 correctional officers at the St. Thomas Jail; the federal consent decree requires that there be 63," she said.

She said the Alexander A. Farrelly Criminal Justice Complex in St. Thomas "was never intended nor designed as a facility to house inmates long-term. It was designed as an intake facility where recently-arrested inmates would spend a week at most, while being processed, before being transferred elsewhere to await trial. Space at the St. Thomas Jail is extremely limited."

The director nominee also spoke on a topic that has been at the forefront of public discuss: mental health.

"Of the 43 inmates being held in pre-trial detention at the St. Thomas Jail, 18 are suffering from some form of mental illness. Some of these inmates have not been charged with any crime or were arrested for minor misdemeanors. But they are being kept at the St. Thomas Jail simply because the Territory does not have a long-term, psychiatric facility for chronically mental health patients that could house them," she said.

"Providing adequate treatment and facilities for the chronically mentally ill is a Territory-wide problem, which manifests itself in Bureau facilities. Virgin Islands residents suffering from acute mental illness are brought to Bureau facilities by default because there is nowhere else to put them. That means that an inmate with mental illness, who may not have committed any crime, may spend months or even years at the St. Thomas Jail pending appropriate treatment. One inmate, LC, who suffers from chronic schizophrenia, has been incarcerated for over 8 years while awaiting trial.

"There is a real risk that these mentally ill inmates will deteriorate while awaiting hospitalization or treatment. To meet the Bureau's obligations under the federal consent decree to hospitalize and treat inmates with mental illness, the Legislature must address the chronic lack of hospital beds in the Territory for those suffering from an acute mental illness," the director nominee added.

Ms. Testamark revealed that B.O.C. currently houses 194 prisoners at correctional facilities on the U.S. mainland at a cost of between \$12 million and \$15 million per year. "These off-island prisoner transfers are necessary because the Virgin Islands does not have adequate correctional facilities to hold all classifications of prisoners; because of the deteriorating conditions at Golden Grove and the St. Thomas Jail; and because of the chronic shortage of trained correctional officers," she said.

"Moreover, the cost to house a prisoner in the Virgin Islands – at current facilities – is more than twice the cost of housing that same prisoner on the mainland. The Bureau estimates that the cost of keeping an inmate in the territory at \$240 per day, not including medical or dental costs. The cost of housing an inmate in a correctional facility on the

mainland averages between \$67 and \$85 per day," Ms. Testamark added.

Most of the territory's off-island prisoners are housed in the Citrus County Detention Facility in Florida and the Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility in Mississippi. Both facilities are operated by a private company called CoreCivic, Ms. Testamark revealed.

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