

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Senate Hearing, Dept. of Justice A.G. Nominee Says Staffing Is 'Woefully Inadequate' To Accomplish Tasks

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Senators who make up the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Wednesday voted to advance the nomination of Denise George to be the territory's Attorney General, with all senators voting in the affirmative. Her nomination will face its final test during sessions scheduled for mid-May.

While giving testimony, Ms. George spoke highly of the employees currently at the department, and said morale had improved with her arrival. Even so, she was sure to point out the severe staffing shortage, an issue she said hampers the department.

“...The department’s staffing levels are woefully inadequate. In order to fully comply with the department’s statutory obligations and duties, more critical staff are required... The Division of Paternity and Child Support staffing level is below critical mass,” she said. “A number of years ago, that Division had five case workers on St. Thomas that were equipped to handle the workload. Today, that number is one. There is only one case worker who is responsible for roughly 5,000 cases and only one assistant attorney general in each district. This is unacceptable to me as the head of the Department of Justice, and even more unacceptable to the customers of PCSD.”

Ms. George told senators that the PCSD needs more case workers, customer service representatives and attorneys in order for “PCSD to achieve its mission and provide more reliable and efficient service to the public.”

She also brought to the fore the defunctness of the White Collar and Public Corruption Crime Division. Citing Title 3 V.I.C. § 118 that requires the Department of Justice to establish and maintain a White Collar Crime and Public Corruption Unit to institute aggressive prosecution of white collar crime and corruption, Ms. George lamented that the unit has been virtually dismantled.

“For whatever reasons, members who once served in that division have been terminated, have moved on from the department, or were transferred to other divisions within the department, thus leaving a once active, robust and successful division to a mere shell of its former self,” she said, promising to rebuild the division by hiring trained and seasoned investigators and skilled attorneys with a background in White Collar investigations and prosecutions.

“This is important because undetected and unchecked corruption in our government can cause serious damage by undermining the public trust in government and wasting public resources and money by directing those resources to corrupt officials at the expense of members of our community who should benefit,” Ms. George added.

New hires with varying backgrounds will also be needed to staff the recently-approved Medicaid Fraud Control Unit (MFCU). That unit was created following its certification last December, according to Ms. George.

She also discussed other staffing issues, which she said necessitated the establishment of a Human Resources Division within the Department “to recruit skilled and highly-trained employees, handle collective bargaining issues, conduct professional development training, and administer FMLA, ADA and other workplace legal requirements.”

Outlining her vision for the Department, Ms. George said she intends to “administer the law with fairness, integrity and impartiality, and to perform our legal mandates and service to the public with excellence. To accomplish this, our prosecutorial decisions and judgments must be made independently and objectively based upon the evidence, facts and applicable law, without influence of politics, public opinion, news reports, rumor or innuendo.”