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D.O.J.'s Paternity and Child Support Division Has Caseload of 8,600 But Only 5 Case Managers; Office Space Rent Climbs to \$320,000 Annually in FY2021

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Mother walks with child. By. DREAMSTIME/VICONSORTIUM

V.I. Attorney General Denise George said Thursday that the Paternity and Child Support Division within the Dept. of Justice remains understaffed and lacks child support hearings, issues that trickle down to and affect children living with single parents in the territory.

Ms. George spoke of the challenges facing the division during D.O.J.'s budget hearing in the Committee on Finance, chaired by Senator Kurt Vialet.

Honing in on the issue, Senator Myron Jackson said he wanted to have a "talk to Jesus" conversation with Ms. George about connecting the dots and the domino effect the ineffectiveness of the division has had on the community. He said the division has failed to address the needs of single parents, the overwhelming majority of whom are mothers.

There are currently 8,600 child support cases and only five active case administrators in the territory to manage them. Mr. Jackson said the lack of case administrators and heavy caseload connect the dot. "If you can't do your job adequately to address the children of this territory, then we see the domino effect because it has an impact," said Mr. Jackson.

Ms. George agreed that the work of the Paternity and Child Support Division is critical. Even so, for the last 8 years the division has been dealing with insufficient staffing.

"I met it here like this, at the [five] caseworkers, for the [8,600] cases. However, we have recognized it needs to be fixed for the benefit of the children," said the attorney general, who was appointed to her role [in March 2019](#).

D.O.J. told the Senate that to have a functional Paternity and Child Support Division, the division would need 87 employees. Currently, there are 53 employees in this division, with only 5 of them as case managers. The other employees are administrative staff — the collections division, legal matters, support staff, program directors, among others — from both districts.

D.O.J. said while it has recruited individuals for the remaining 34 critical positions needed at the division, the Office of Management and Budget (O.M.B.) has yet to fill those positions because of funding constraints.

"I am in constant communication with O.M.B. and they are working on the process to get these jobs through," said A.G. George. The attorney general added that the duties of the division goes beyond the collection of child support. "The access and visitation and fatherhood programs at the division are geared to support mediation, and also assisting free of charge fathers and noncustodial parents to have that interaction and be in the children's lives, because it makes a big difference," she said.

The division has not been conducting child support hearings, a matter that Senator Janelle Sarauw raised to Ms. George. The attorney general initially said that hearings were not banned, but that the division has had to make modifications to conduct hearings safely and adequately.

The senator was not impressed.

"Court cases are taking place, Paternity and Child Support is in crisis and has been in crisis... I just don't know how in seven months we have not had a paternity and child support hearing," Ms. Sarauw chastised, pointing toward Zoom and Microsoft Teams as easy-to-use services that could be utilized.

The A.G. quickly replied to the senator stating that the division had recently found a way to conduct the hearings, which she said would commence next week.

On top of the division's internal problems, the post-audit report shows that the D.O.J.'s rent for the division's office at the Nisky Center on St. Thomas has increased, with the division entering into a new, 5-year lease starting October 1. Kathryn Jensen-DeLugo, program specialist for the Paternity and Child Support Division, told lawmakers that the number represented in the post-audit report was for the rent of a combined lease for the Nisky Center property. D.O.J. claims the additional

space is for the Paternity and Child Support hearing officer since the officer is not supposed to be co-located in the same space as administrative services.

As of FY 2020, D.O.J. was paying \$229,856 annually for its Paternity and Child Support office, which currently occupies 10,448 sq. ft.

Per the new lease, D.O.J. will be expanding the division's space with an additional 990 sq. ft. for a total of 11,438 sq. ft. of space. The rent increase is around \$90,000, putting the annual rent for FY 2021 at \$319,856.

D.O.J.'s budget request for FY2021, including local and federal funding, totals \$26,779,608.

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