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V.I. Dept. of Justice Announces New Medical Examiner's Office With Autopsy Suite, Morgue and More

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The V.I. Dept. of Justice this week announced the opening of its new Medical Examiner's (ME) Office at 10A & 11A Bjerre Gade, St. Thomas. The facility includes an autopsy suite, morgue, and offices for the medical examiners and staff.

The office is outfitted with two autopsy tables; an X-ray machine, a 20-body cooler (40 bodies when stacked); visitors/family room; observation/identification room; offices for both medical examiners; and handicap accessible bathrooms with locker, shower, washer/dryer, and backup generators. The parking lot has enough space to add at least two 40-foot trailers, allowing the staff to quickly respond to a mass-casualty event, the D.O.J. said.

According to the release, Attorney General Denise George recently joined the ME Office's Director of Operations, Anthony Hunt during a final walkthrough of the long-awaited office. Plans for the new location at the former Creque's Funeral Home were [unveiled in January 2017](#) during the tenure of former Attorney General Claude Walker, as work was underway to transform it into a medical examiner office.

"This is a great accomplishment. The Medical Examiner's Office is such an integral part of the DOJ because it plays an important role in the investigation and prosecution of homicides," Ms. George stated. "It just takes it to a new level so that we can preserve and enhance the integrity of not only the ME investigations but homicide prosecutions as well."

The former ME office was housed at the Schneider Regional Medical Center. Mr. Hunt said the new building layout is a more private and secure setting that is conducive to the work of forensic pathologists. In criminal cases, it is especially critical to limit the amount of access to any evidence that may be used in a trial. He added, "The medical examiners are the forensic pathologists for the DOJ, they serve as key witnesses in all homicide presentations in the V.I."

The MEs are medical doctors employed with the V.I. Department of Justice. They are the first responders to calls of death to pick up and secure the bodies of the deceased. MEs have the legal power to make inquiries into all unnatural or suspicious deaths, conduct subpoena, and examine witnesses under oath in the same manner as a court. Additionally, the MEs must perform autopsies and testify when reports are used to substantiate the cause and manner of death in homicide cases.

D.O.J. said the ME investigates the deaths of every person who dies within the V.I, or whose body is found within the Virgin Islands including:

- A violent death, whether by criminal violence, suicide, or casualty
- A death caused by an unlawful act or criminal neglect
- A death occurring in a suspicious, unusual or unexplained manner
- A death caused by suspected criminal abortion
- A death while unattended by a physician, so far as can be discovered, or where no physician able to certify the cause of death as provided by law can be found
- Death of a person confined to a public institution other than a hospital, infirmary, or nursing home.

According to the release, MEs have the authority to perform autopsies to determine the true medical cause and manner of death and make a positive identification of unidentifiable remains through testing DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), Dental Records & Fingerprints.

DOJ medical examiner, Dr. Francisco Landron has advocated for this facility. As an ME with the DOJ for over 25 years, he stated, "It's historical for the V.I. and beneficial for the DOJ because we have our own morgue with new modern equipment. The enhancements and size also address the problem of available space experienced at the hospital.

Although the lab is outfitted with new equipment, it does not include a toxicology lab. Therefore, Dr. Landron explained that samples are sent away to a reputable forensic lab. He said he is hopeful that a lab will be considered, although costly. "It would be great to have one in the near future, but that entails a whole set of different forensic science trained personnel, a toxicology lab, and equipment that can be quite costly."

Mr. Hunt said the ME's office works in tandem with the V.I. Police Department. He said officers will utilize the facility for their homicide and accident investigations. The facility will also serve as training for local law enforcement officers in areas such as anatomy, mechanism of injuries, and methods of collecting evidence. The facility will also enable forensic science students, nursing students, and related field interns to gain hands-on experience, according to the release.

Ms. George said since the launch, completing this project has been a priority. She said work is underway to acquire a separate ME office on St. Croix. "It will be beneficial to have offices separately on both islands. This significant improvement in the level of service is something we can all be proud of," the A.G. stated.

According to the release, funding for the autopsy suite was provided through grant funds from the U.S. Department of Justice's Justice Assistance Grant Program in the form of a sub grant from the Law Enforcement Planning Commission (LEPC) and direct funding from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ).

The generator was purchased with funds from the Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) through the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency. Grant funds had also been used to purchase supplies, such as body bags, protective gowns, face and eye-protective shields, and surgical equipment to perform autopsies, the release stated.