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Unbelievable, Horror Movie Conditions at Morgue on St. Croix Forces Medical Examiner to Resign

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A bloody sheet. By. GETTY IMAGES

Last month the St. Croix medical examiner announced her resignation in a disturbing letter which details shocking allegations of working conditions so dire that they are difficult to imagine.

Dr. Jacqueline Pender, who in mid-June wrote to ask that her contract be terminated on the 24th of that month, said in her resignation letter that for years she had been begging authorities at the V.I. Department of Justice, under whose authority the Medical Examiner's Office falls, for the basic tools and equipment she needed to do her job. Since 2016, when Dr. Pender began performing autopsies on St. Croix, she says conditions deteriorated to a point where things became absolutely untenable, leaving her no choice but to quit.

Some of those basic items Pender says she lacks include a microscope, tools necessary for autopsies and personal protective equipment. In her letter, Pender says she had warned DOJ officials about low PPE stocks for years until they finally ran out. Before inventory dwindled away to nothing, the former medical examiner said she appealed to DOJ officials but was told that there was “no money in the budget for the Medical Examiner’s Office.”

Dr. Pender said in her resignation letter that instead of using an x-ray machine on victims of gun violence, she had to resort to going to Home Depot to purchase a stud finder, which she has been using, since 2017, to locate bullets in her autopsy subjects.

The letter, provided to the Consortium by a confidential source, goes on to detail accommodations Pender is forced to make that might cause squeamishness for some readers, or anger among grieving relatives of deceased people who might have had to undergo this process. She speaks of having to do her work in the cramped quarters of the back room of a funeral home, performing autopsies “on an embalming table surrounded by corpses.” She speaks of not having an appropriate scale and having to substitute with a self-purchased meal prep food scale. To use the small scale, Pender says she was forced to cut the organs of those she performs autopsies on into pieces small enough to fit on the scale, tallying up the weight of each piece to find the complete organ’s weight.

In a scene that reads like it was copied from the pages of a particularly grisly horror movie, Dr. Pender describes the effect of the stopped drain in the sink at the Juan F. Luis Hospital morgue. She says the lack of drainage means that the sink, after every autopsy, is filled with bodily fluids. “I can no longer stand and stir a sink full of blood, feces, and vomit after each autopsy, watching and hoping it drains millimeter by millimeter, before starting the next autopsy case. There have been times we have had to empty the bodily fluids out of the morgue sink, cup by cup, into a mopping bucket, and roll it down the hallway to a toilet, then pouring the bodily fluids cup by cup into a toilet, flushing each cup of bodily fluids down the toilet,” Pender’s resignation letter reads.

Not only was this alarming state of affairs creating working conditions so intolerable that Pender says she had no choice but to give up her dream of being a medical examiner for the VIDOJ, but it engendered a scenario where the work of DOJ prosecutors could be imperiled. Dr. Pender argues that the integrity of all evidence coming out of the JFL morgue has been compromised by the space being left “unlocked and literally open to the public” for the past two years.

Consortium journalists, upon receipt and verification of the alarming contents of Dr. Pender’s resignation letter, immediately contacted the Department of Justice for comment. DOJ declined to address Pender’s departure or her reasons for leaving, saying “The Office of the Attorney General will not and cannot publicly respond to inquiries about, or engage in, any public dialogue arising from confidential personnel matters, communications or issues of any employee or former employee of the DOJ.”

Despite refusing to address the allegations of fact made in Pender’s letter, the statement ascribed to Attorney General Denise George went on to provide a bulleted list of recent activities undertaken by the DOJ relating to the duties of the Medical Examiner on St. Croix. DOJ says that earlier this year, a 40-ft refrigerated, mobile morgue container fully-equipped for medical examiner functionality had been purchased and shipped. It is currently being installed at JFL.

DOJ also says that several months ago two portable X-ray machines had been purchased; they are now shipped and delivered, with the machine designated for St. Croix awaiting a “secure and suitable location to be identified” to be transferred or, failing that, awaiting the completion of “the

new ME office.” Regarding that office, DOJ says it is currently moving forward with “procurement plans” for the “design/build construction and installation of a new Medical Examiner Office Facility including a morgue and autopsy suite in St. Croix,” after which the Medical Examiner would no longer work out of the JFL morgue.

Although the statement from the DOJ did not provide any timeline for when the St. Croix Medical Examiner’s Office might be completed, it did note that until such time as the Office might become functional, all autopsies will be done at the Medical Examiner's Office on St. Thomas.

The Department of Justice also announced that a new position had been created — that of Territorial Medical Examiner — who would have management authority over the Medical Examiner’s Offices on “St. Thomas” and St. Croix.

Despite the provided information, the response from DOJ ignored several questions posed by Consortium journalists, including how long the agency has known about the unhealthy, unsanitary conditions at JFL morgue on St. Croix as described by Dr. Pender in the letter. Our journalists also wanted to know whether it was true that the morgue had been “unlocked” for two years, and if so, what implications that would have on DOJ convictions that relied on evidence from autopsies done at a facility where the integrity of the chain of custody has been called into question.

We wanted to know whether Dr. Pender, whose contract was ostensibly terminated on June 24th, has been replaced, and if so, when. The DOJ statement ignored our inquiry about how agency management could allow such a work environment to allegedly persist for years, and also ignored our inquiry about whether an apology to the community was warranted given the facts at hand.

The Office of the Governor has also been made aware of the information contained in Dr. Pender’s letter and asked to comment. As of press time, a public statement on the issue from Governor Albert Bryan has not been forthcoming, with Mr. Bryan referring the publication to the attorney general's response.