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A.G. George Fails to Answer Key Questions in Second Statement About St. Croix Medical Examiner's Resignation

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V.I. Attorney General under the Bryan Administration, Denise George.

Attorney General Denise George, on Wednesday evening, issued the second statement in two days in response to reporting by the Consortium of the reported horror-show conditions the former St. Croix Medical Examiner endured before she resigned last month.

Wednesday's statement repeated the assertions made by the first, that the Department of Justice had moved to act following complaints from Dr. Jacqueline Pender made earlier this year. "When the former ME complained of security concerns regarding how bodies were stored at the JFL Morgue earlier this year," the attorney general wrote, "DOJ immediately purchased a new fully

equipped 40-foot DOJ Medical Examiner refrigerated mobile morgue container to properly secure DOJ bodies pending autopsies, all in consultation with the ME.” That container, George says, is currently being installed, although her statement gives no idea of the timeline for that process or an estimation on when it will be ready for use.

George also, for the second time this week, noted that “two portable digital X-ray machines” had been purchased and delivered at the former Medical Examiner’s recommendation, but said that the one designated for St. Croix would not be delivered until a new Medical Examiner’s facility is completed. Again, no timeline for this project was provided, and thus St. Croix residents have no idea how much longer the bodies of their loved ones will have to be sent to St. Thomas and back for autopsy procedures to be completed.

Consortium journalists learned via conversations with a member of the 31st Legislature, that money for the medical examiner’s offices was approved back in fiscal year 2015-2016. Former Attorney General Claude Walker had asked for and [received permission](#) from the Senate to reallocate funds designated for a crime laboratory so that DOJ could construct two morgues instead, since the needs in the territory were so pressing. Construction was completed on the facility in St. Thomas, but Consortium journalists have been unable to ascertain why the St. Croix facility was never built. George’s statement says that after the Juan F. Luis Hospital announced that it would demolish the existing hospital structures after the extensive storm damage in 2017, including the morgue, “immediate plans” were made for a DOJ Medical Examiner facility for St. Croix. The statement did not mention why the previous plans made by the former attorney general never came to pass.

George’s second statement contains information that could be viewed as conflicting with the narrative presented by the former Medical Examiner. For example, Dr. Pender wrote in her resignation letter, which Consortium journalists have been able to read in full, that she had been raising issues for years with her DOJ superiors about the lack of basic tools and equipment to adequately perform her job duties. However the mobile container and the two X-rays, according to the attorney general, were only purchased this year, reinforcing the question we asked at the beginning of the week: how long has the Department of Justice been aware of the horrific conditions endured by the former Medical Examiner?

Questions about the validity of evidence used by DOJ prosecutors were also not addressed by the Attorney General, who merely noted that the morgue at Juan F. Luis Hospital was not under the management of the Department of Justice. In her letter, Dr. Pender said the JFL morgue has stood unlocked and accessible to the public for years, something which Consortium journalists verified to be still the case as recently as a few days ago. Although autopsies of homicide victims are now being performed at DOJ facilities on St. Thomas, the open question still remains of how evidence obtained from autopsies performed on bodies stored at JFL over the past couple of years can be relied on if the facility was vulnerable to being accessed at any time by anyone at all who wanted to walk in.

Although George’s statement answered none of the several outstanding questions asked by journalists of our digital native news organization, these questions — and more — were likely asked of the attorney general during a hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Public Safety & Health, to which she was summoned at 2:00 p.m. on Thursday.