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Transportation of Deceased Costing Dept. of Justice Nearly \$2,000 Per Body; Temporary Morgue on St. Croix Months Away

Government / **Published On August 23, 2022 04:50 AM /**

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V.I. Attorney General Denise George testified by the Senate on Aug. 22, 2022. By. THE V.I. LEGISLATURE

It's costing the U.S Virgin Islands government \$1,900 for each body the V.I Department of Justice transports to St. Thomas to be autopsied, since the Medical Examiner's Office at the Juan F. Luis Hospital was deemed unusable as a result of substandard working conditions caused by years of neglect.

Currently, all autopsies— regardless of where the death occurred—is being performed in St. Thomas until the St. Croix Medical Examiner's Office including a morgue and autopsy suite is

established. Since the practice began, the department has spent approximately \$5,700 to transport six bodies to be examined.

In late October of 2020, D.O.J. was informed that the hospital's morgue was going to be demolished and D.O.J. officials said they were given 90 days to vacate the building. Yet almost a year later, the department is transporting bodies to St. Thomas instead.

The matter involving the morgue on St. Croix became a focal point following a Consortium report on the [horror movie conditions at the facility](#), which led to the resignation of medical examiner.

Former Medical Examiner on St. Croix, 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.

Attorney Carla Jacobs said the current arrangement is costing the D.O.J. \$950 one way from St. Croix to St. Thomas and another \$950 to return the body. The Attorney General's Office funds the cost of transportation.

According to Ms. Jacobs, bodies are usually dealt within 24 hours after they arrive on St. Thomas but there was one incident of [a triple homicide which caused a delay](#).

"Since we have started transporting bodies from St. Croix to St. Thomas for autopsies, we have transported six bodies and in each instance except for one, the body is transported to St. Thomas on one day, the autopsy is performed the next day and that body is immediately transferred back to St. Croix that same day," she explained.

"There was one instance where we transported three bodies from St. Croix to St. Thomas for an autopsy – that's related to a triple homicide – the bodies were transported on July 27, 2022 and returned August 2, 2022."

Since the closure of the St. Croix morgue and the resignation of medical examiner, Dr. Pender, a funeral home – which the department did not name – had been used to store dead bodies on St. Croix. But Attorney General, Denise George said that arrangement was "not working out."

"I had to make a very difficult determination to have autopsies transferred and transported safely and securely to St. Thomas to the Medical Examiner's Office to have the autopsies performed," she told senators on Monday during the department's budget presentation.

To preserve the bodies, the D.O.J. said it recently installed a "fully-equipped morgue container" unit at the Juan F. Luis Hospital in St. Croix to act as a mortuary until the bodies are ready to be transported to St. Thomas for examination. "It is a 40ft trailer complete with all of the equipment that is necessary in order to have the proper storage of the D.O.J. bodies," Ms. George remarked. The facility was being installed as recently as last month, [according to a release](#) D.O.J. issued.

Meanwhile, plans are underway to construct a temporary modular facility to house the Medical Examiner's Office on St. Croix in the next four months using proceeds from the Criminal Activity Investigation and Prosecution Fund. The attorney general said the cost is still being negotiated, though the repairs are projected to be completed by the end of December 2022. She said the projection is based on the vendor's ability to produce a "turn-key type" modular facility.

The department also intends to start nation-wide recruitment for a new medical examiner this week. She said, “I do not intend to have a medical examiner on board until such time that we have an appropriate facility – medical examiner facility with the autopsy suite and more – that is fully equipped so that they can work out of.”

In this fiscal year, from October 2021 to the present, the Medical Examiner’s Office said it responded and took charge of 260 deaths. Of those who died, 40 autopsies were performed on persons who died in the St. Croix District and 24 autopsies were performed on persons who died in the St. Thomas/St. John District.

Given that trend, Ms. George said there is currently enough funds to sustain the off-island transportation arrangement until the temporary facility is constructed.

The D.O.J. presented a proposed budget, including local and federal funds of \$28,010,235 for fiscal year 2023.