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New Morgue on St. Croix to be in Operation Mid-May, Dept. of Justice Says

Top Stories / **Published On February 09, 2023 06:31 AM /**

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The V.I. Department of Justice on Tuesday told lawmakers that work on a modular morgue on St. Croix has been ongoing, and the new facility will be open to service the community two and a half months after the structure's arrival on St. Croix at the end of February.

That puts launch date somewhere around mid-May, according to testimony provided by Acting Attorney General Carol Thomas-Jacobs, who was named to the position by Governor Albert Bryan in December following [the dismissal](#) of Denise George.

The St. Croix Morgue status update follows investigative reporting by the V.I. Consortium that exposed [unbelievable, horror-movie conditions](#) at the St. Croix morgue back in July 2022, which

led the medical examiner on St. Croix at the time, Dr. Jacqueline Pender, to tender her resignation.

Dr. Pender, who in mid-June 2022 had written the V.I. Dept. of Justice 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. D.O.J., 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.

On Tuesday, Ms. Thomas-Jacobs told lawmakers that extensive work had been done to remedy the situation on St. Croix.

Still, the department only has one full-time medical examiner on staff along with an ME whose services are utilized when needed. Additionally, three full-time employees assist the ME on St. Thomas, and two on St. Croix.

"The department needs two more legal death investigators, with one in each district. Also, we continue to proactively seek another full time forensic pathologist," said Ms. Thomas-Jacobs. Regarding St. John, she said, "When needed, a resident of St. John supports the Medical Examiner's Office by picking up bodies of persons who died in St. John."

The modular facility is complete, according to the acting A.G. She described it as a 2,400 square foot structure that consists of a lobby and reception area, viewing room, two medical examiner offices, an autopsy room with double bays so two autopsies can be performed at the same time, public restroom, staff restroom, clean room, office for the legal death investigators, and walk-in cooler and closets for equipment and supplies.

"All equipment for the modular Medical Examiner's Office has been purchased. The modular structure was picked up from the factory on about January 31st and is being shipped from the Port of Jacksonville, Florida to the Virgin Islands. It will arrive in St. Croix before the end of February," Ms. Thomas-Jacobs said during testimony Tuesday.

The government has expended \$1,057,900.59 in costs for the project, with \$1,003,637 paid to the contractor and \$54,263.59 representing costs incurred for permits and consulting fees for engineering and permitting, according to Ms. Thomas-Jacobs.

"The next phase of the project is the installation of the modular facility, which will include but is not limited to earth work, construction of footing, plumbing and electrical work, construction of steps and ramps, the installation of canopies, medical equipment and a fire alarm system," she said.

The government will need to provide the D.O.J. with additional funding to complete the project, Ms. Thomas-Jacobs said, and she suggested using funds appropriated through [Act. No. 7810](#) — an Act establishing a forensic crime lab in accordance with national standards and making an appropriation of \$500,000 to fund the crime laboratory — which would allow the project to continue unimpeded.

"We have been informed that if the building is well maintained its lifespan is between 25-30 years, thus I urge the Legislature in the next budgeting cycle to set aside funds for the maintenance and upkeep of both medical examiner facilities," the acting A.G. urged.

