

Tensions with Virgin Islands Governor Over Epstein Led to Attorney General's Firing

Denise George, who led a three-year investigation into the activities of Jeffrey Epstein, was fired recently.



By Matthew Goldstein

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The former attorney general for the Virgin Islands, who recently secured a \$105 million settlement from the estate of Jeffrey Epstein, was recently fired following months of friction between her and the U.S. territory's governor over the handling of the investigation into the disgraced financier, according to people briefed on the matter.

Denise N. George, the former official, was dismissed by Albert Bryan Jr., the governor of the Virgin Islands, on New Year's Eve, four days after her office sued JPMorgan Chase in federal court in Manhattan for its dealings with Mr. Epstein, who died of an apparent suicide in 2019 while in federal custody.

The timing of Ms. George's firing fueled media speculation in the Virgin Islands and beyond that the suit against JPMorgan was the immediate cause.

But the people briefed on the matter, who were not authorized to talk publicly because Mr. Bryan's office did not give a specific reason for Ms. George's dismissal, said there had been tension between the two public officials for a while.

It was partly tied to Mr. Bryan feeling that Ms. George didn't keep him apprised about the investigation in a timely manner, one of the people said. Attorneys general aren't usually required to inform governors of lawsuits they intend to file.

Ms. George did not address the speculation, but defended her decision to sue the bank and the work her office had done to make sure the dozens of women who were victims of Mr. Epstein's sexual abuse as teenagers or young adults were appropriately compensated.

"I stand firm in my belief that the lawsuit I filed against JPMorgan Chase in our pursuit of justice must continue," Ms. George said in a statement to The New York Times. "No institution, organization or person should be off-limits, no matter how wealthy or powerful."

Ms. George also thanked Mr. Bryan for appointing her to the role in 2019.

Richard Motta, a spokesman for Mr. Bryan, said in an emailed statement that "media reports indicating the JPMorgan lawsuit as the reason are not entirely accurate."

A JPMorgan spokeswoman declined to comment.

In a November interview with a local publication following his re-election to a second term, Mr. Bryan had said he intended to make some changes in his cabinet, but did not name any government officials.

During her four-year tenure, Ms. George led a wide-ranging investigation into the activities of Mr. Epstein. In November, her office secured a hard-fought settlement with his estate that will return at least \$105 million to the Virgin Islands, where the poverty rate is far higher than the U.S. national average. The territory stands to take in more money depending on the sale price the estate can get for Little St. James, Mr. Epstein's former private island residence.

Ms. George had also subpoenaed some of the wealthy men who did business with him, including Wall Street billionaire Leon Black. Mr. Black paid Mr. Epstein \$158 million for tax and estate planning services in the years before Mr. Epstein was arrested in 2019 on federal sex trafficking charges.

In late December, Ms. George's office sued JPMorgan in federal court in Manhattan, claiming that bank was derelict in providing banking services to Mr. Epstein during the time he was charged with sexually abusing teenage girls and young women at Little St. James and elsewhere in the U.S.

The lawsuit accused JPMorgan of facilitating and concealing wire and cash transactions that should have raised suspicions that Mr. Epstein was engaging in the sexual trafficking of teen girls and young women. The lawsuit contends the bank essentially turned a "blind eye" to Mr. Epstein's conduct because it was profitable.

JPMorgan, the largest U.S. bank by assets, was Mr. Epstein's primary banker from the late 1990s to 2013. In 2008, Mr. Epstein pleaded guilty in Florida to two counts of soliciting prostitution from a teenage girl and was required to register as a sex offender in most jurisdictions.

Ms. George's investigation was complicated by the fact that Mr. Epstein had a two-decade long relationship with the Virgin Islands, both as a resident and as a businessman.

Mr. Epstein contributed money to local politicians, and one of his foundations donated to local schools. His businesses there received several lucrative tax incentives that allowed them to avoid paying tens of millions of dollars in taxes.

Before becoming governor, Mr. Bryan was the chairman of the economic development agency that had awarded lucrative tax benefits to one of Mr. Epstein's companies.

“The Virgin Islands attorney general, as in everywhere else in the United States, is required to prosecute or pursue legal action for violations of the law, and to serve the people,” Ms. George said in her statement. “Doing the job of the attorney general should not be incompatible with holding the job of attorney general.”

There is no indication that the Virgin Islands will move to dismiss the lawsuit against JPMorgan.

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