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For an agency that infamously burned through P125 million in public funds in the last 11 days of 2022, there’s no small irony in discovering that the Office of the Vice President (OVP) is now struggling to spend a much-reduced budget this year.

Then again, perhaps this is only to be expected of an office whose impeached leader is unaccustomed to operating under the glare of heightened scrutiny. Still, it is disconcerting to see Vice President Sara Duterte’s office swing from one extreme of fiscal mismanagement to another, that is, from accusations of reckless, unchecked extravagance to apparent gross inefficiency due to poor absorptive capacity.

As of June, Duterte’s office has logged a fund utilization rate of 34 percent, meaning it has only used up around P250 million of its P733 million budget for 2025, the OVP admitted last week. “[We] intend to use up the entire budget that was allotted to us for 2025,” OVP spokesperson Ruth Castelo said. “[W]e still have time, and we’re going to speed up the action on all of our programs.”

To hear the OVP mouthpiece tell it, this is all just an exercise in caution to avoid further controversy. “We understand that we need to speed up utilizing the funds, but we also do not want to carelessly utilize the funds. So we are being very careful so as not to open any issue that may be thrown against us,” Castelo said.

## P170 million budget hike

She cited “a lot of challenges inside, internally, in the [OVP]” that affected its use of funds, alluding to the allegations that culminated in Duterte’s impeachment and looming trial—on charges that she misused P612.5 million in confidential funds granted to the OVP and to the Department of Education, which she headed for two years.

Yet now we hear that the OVP has requested—and been granted—a P170-million hike in its proposed budget for 2026. From P733 million, Duterte’s office is seeking P903 million in its outlay next year.

In approving the request, the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) cited mandatory salary adjustments and the need to fund a government-wide digitalization program despite the OVP’s underspending woes. This was the same DBM that noted a low budget utilization rate signals an agency’s limited capacity to spend more funds.

In August 2024, Budget Secretary Amenah Pangandaman said only “implementation-ready” programs should be funded in the national outlay, and agencies with low obligation rates must submit catch-up plans.

## Inefficient or opaque spending

Meanwhile, Castelo claimed that the OVP used 85.55 percent, or P1.783 billion, out of its total purse of P2.084 billion in 2024, as funding for certain OVP projects was not released in time because of additional requirements.

But in the absence of more recent figures, let’s recall that the OVP ranked among the bottom 10 agencies with the lowest obligation rates as of June 30, 2024, showing that its poor spending is not a recent development at all.

So, why increase the OVP’s budget given its history of both uneconomical and opaque spending?

In August 2023, then Deputy Minority Leader France Castro exposed that the OVP under Duterte had spent the entire P125-million confidential fund in just 19 days, in December 2022. Then came an even more damning confirmation: In September 2023, then Marikina Rep. Stella Quimbo revealed that the funds were actually depleted in just 11 days, not 19.

The paper trail only got murkier. By November 2024, COA disclosed that the OVP had submitted more than 1,200 deficient acknowledgment receipts, many with unreadable names, erroneous dates, or only initials.

## Taxpayers footing the bill

The farce reached absurd proportions with the discovery by House legislators that receipts submitted by the OVP included such names as “Mary Grace Piattos,” who had no birth, marriage, or death records, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority.

These fictional beneficiaries and fake receipts would be laughable if it weren’t for the fact that taxpayers are footing the bill. Worse, it seems Duterte’s OVP didn’t learn its lesson. In COA’s 2023 audit report released last December, the agency disclosed that the OVP spent over P375 million in confidential funds, triple the amount in 2022. By the next year, the agency withdrew its request for the secret outlay.

All this paints the OVP as a study in contradiction: a public office that demands extraordinary power and funding, yet repeatedly fails to demonstrate even basic standards of prudence, transparency, or competence. When entrusted with confidential funds, it blew through them with alarming speed and little accountability. When tasked with regular public spending, it moves with all the urgency of an underpaid bureaucrat.

The gall of this same office to ask for a bigger budget despite its dismal spending record should alarm every Filipino. Until the OVP proves it can manage taxpayer money with discipline and integrity, it deserves not one peso more.