

FEBRUARY 6, 2024

**VIRGIN ISLANDS
PORT AUTHORITY**

TESTIMONY

Submitted to the Honorable Donna Frett-Gregory
Senator
35th Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands

Chairperson, Committee on Budget,
Appropriations and Finance

Presented by:

Mr. Bill Rawlins
Assistant Executive Director

on behalf of

Mr. Carlton Dowe
Executive Director



Good morning Honorable Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, Chairperson of the 35th Legislature's Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, to the distinguished members of this Committee and honorable senators in attendance, the legislative staff, and to the listening and viewing audience. I am Bill Rawlins, the Assistant Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Port Authority (VIPA), presenting this testimony on behalf of VIPA's Executive Director, Mr. Carlton Dowe.

I am present today to provide testimony in support of Bill No. 35-0133, which seeks to amend Title 17, Chapter 15 of the Virgin Islands Code relating to scholarships by adding Section 190gg to establish an educational scholarship program that will support individuals interested in pursuing a career in the maritime industry in the USVI.

The maritime industry plays a vital role in the economic development of many countries – including the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), which is highly dependent upon the importation of cargo. The USVI also serves as a transshipment port to nearby Caribbean islands. Furthermore, the transportation services at our seaports provide a key mode of travel for the visitors that bolsters our tourism industry. Our seaports are also essential for connecting our residents with the world.

The marine industry is vast in the positions it provides for employment and entrepreneurship. Seafaring positions offer advantages such as high starting wages, travel opportunities, and career flexibility with training and skills that can be utilized globally.

Marine employment opportunities include operating and repairing passenger and private vessels; working at marinas that service luxury yachts; the cruise industry that anchors our local tourism industry; commercial fishing professions, cargo shipping; and marine research and administrative positions. The USVI needs individuals who can provide marine biology and research services such as surveys, assessments, ocean life monitoring, and mitigation required by federal agencies during seaport rehabilitation or construction projects and harbor dredging.

VIPA's marine division is the agency's largest division with 50 employees in St. Thomas, 6 employees in St. John, and 17 employees in St. Croix. Our marine employees include harbor pilots, wharfingers, seamen, dockmasters, and administrative employees. Several port police are also pilots and serve as the crew for our police boats.

VIPA's marine facilities also indirectly employ hundreds of residents via the businesses that operate at our seaports. In addition to the Port Authority's

operations, the marine industry in the USVI extends to those employed as commercial fishermen and residents who work at our marinas that service mega yachts, and other pleasure and luxury vessels.

VIPA fully supports the establishment of a maritime scholarship that will be administered by the VI Board of Education to provide opportunities for USVI residents. A scholarship program will allow residents to attend universities and acquire maritime certifications without putting them in debt via school loans.

Per the bill, a student who receives this scholarship must commit to return to work in the USVI – providing there are employment opportunities. This will provide a pool of qualified and employable maritime professionals in a territory that is heavily dependent on the marine industry. VIPA suggests that the proposed scholarship include a minimum number of years that the recipient must work in the territory after completing their educational program.

On behalf of Executive Director Dowe, I commend this Bill's Sponsor, the Honorable Senator Angel Bolques Jr., and all Senators who support this legislation. The VI Maritime Industry Scholarship can provide new educational opportunities for residents of this territory so that they may benefit from the USVI's thriving marine industry. I will remain present to answer any questions that you may have.