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Bill No. 35-0133

In support of The Virgin Islands Maritime Industry Educational Scholarship

Good Morning Donna A. Frett-Gregory, Chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, other members of the 35th Legislature of the US Virgin Islands, legislative staff, and members of the viewing and listening public, my name is Oriel Blake and I am the Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Professional Charter Association (VIPCA). Today I am presenting testimony on **Bill No. 35-0133**, in Support of The Virgin Islands Maritime Industry Educational Scholarship and supporting youth of the Virgin Islands to pursue a career in the maritime industry in the Virgin Islands.

VIPCA is the territory's non-profit marine association, whose purpose is to preserve, protect, and promote the charter yacht sector of the U.S. Virgin Islands marine industry and the businesses that sustain them. VIPCA is a non-profit association of over 800 members, all marine professionals working in, or with the U.S. Virgin Islands maritime industry. VIPCA's focus is multi-faceted and includes providing marine vocational training for youth in the U.S. Virgin Islands. VIPCA is recognized by the Department of Labor and National Apprenticeship system as an eligible training provider, and I have served on the Workforce Development Board for four years. Hence, I am confident to speak to the strengths of the maritime industry as related to the charter yacht sector, and advocate for the needed support for the maritime workforce development in the maritime industry. Such scholarship funding provided by **Bill No. 35-0133** will help to get more participants from, and currently residing in, the U.S. Virgin Islands, into programs such as those offered by VIPCA.

The maritime tourism industry is a growing aspect of the U.S. Virgin Islands Blue Economy, recognized by the Governor by his identifying coastal/ocean resources as one of the eight target areas in Vision 2040. The maritime tourism industry proved its resilience in the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes and in the COVID-19 pandemic, keeping the USVI open to tourism in the wake of both natural disasters. USVI-based charter boats contributing approximately \$88 million to the territory's economy per annum before adding the contribution of visiting super yachts and private recreational cruising yachts for which we don't have data as they are not included in VIPCA's membership. To illustrate the contemporary strength of the maritime tourism industry in the U.S. Virgin Islands, if, according to NOAA, approximately 60% of the Virgin Island's GDP is supported by tourism, and over half of the two million tourists visiting per year engage with marine activities during their stay according to USVI travel portal data, then 1 million tourists engage a charter boat's services annually.

To encourage recruitment into the maritime tourism workforce, both into the charter yacht industry as captains and crew, and into marine technical support jobs on the land, VIPCA runs four different marine training programs in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

1. *Junior Sailing Summer Program age 13-17 – 4 week swimming and sailing, 22 students*
2. *VIPCA Marine Apprenticeship – 4-week career training for captains, 12 students with Standards of Training and Certification in Watchkeeping (STCW)*
3. *VIPCA Registered Apprenticeship Program, taking graduates of the Marine Apprenticeship and placing in on-the-job training for 2000hrs and then completing with USCG Captains License*
4. *Marine Technical Apprenticeship age 18-20, 4-week for technicians, with American Boat and Yacht Council (ABYC) Fundamentals of Marine Service Technology Certification*

Graduates of our training programs have a proven track record of success in maintaining not only a passion for the sea and boats after completion of training, but in joining the workforce once eligible and then certifying with U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) Captains' certifications upon sufficient sea time. We have certified 12 USCG Captains, have 6 pending to take their exams in 2024, plus 3 certified Marine Mechanics. This demonstrates that training can reap immediate reward for the workforce.

Financial support provided in this scholarship in **Bill No. 35-0133** would open the opportunity for maritime training for so many. Speaking to in schools and in VIPCA's community outreach efforts, I meet so many young Virgin Islanders interested in a marine vocational career, who, given the opportunity to train, are keen to get to work as soon as possible in the maritime industry. There are many Crucians who need financial support to travel to St. Thomas to be included in the training here, supporting their accommodation costs during training; the scholarships would benefit many young people not only in training in the Virgin Islands, but training off island in certifications not provided locally too.

I support **Bill No. 35-0133** The Virgin Islands Maritime Industry Educational Scholarship and recommend that it is adopted in order not only to provide a future to the youth of tomorrow in a competitively salaried growing maritime industry, but in providing a future for the U.S. Virgin Islands maritime industry as a bellwether of our tourism economy, and the pinnacle of the Caribbean's tourism industry.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my testimony. For further questions you may contact Oriel Blake at info@vipca.org and via our website www.vipca.org, or by phone 340 642-0656.



Oriel Blake