



**Testimony Before the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks
on Organization's Operations and Services Provided to the Community
August 30, 2024**

Good morning, Chairperson Bolques, members of the Committee, fellow senators, and distinguished audience members, both present and viewing remotely. My name is Junia John-Straker, CEO of Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands (LSSVI). I am accompanied today by Ms. Tisha St. Jules, Social Services Coordinator of the Queen Louise Home for Children.

I want to express my gratitude for the opportunity to speak today about the critical work our organization has undertaken for nearly 120 years in support of the most vulnerable in the Virgin Islands. As the largest private non-profit organization in the territory, LSSVI provides comprehensive support and hope to individuals and families in need through our eleven programs. Our services extend unmatched love and care to children and young adults at the Queen Louise Home for Children, offer essential support to children and families in our Early Head Start program, and provide comfort to adults with developmental disabilities at our two group homes. Our independent living housing facilities offer shelter to low-income adults with disabilities and seniors. In times of natural disaster, we are there to rebuild homes for vulnerable individuals and families. Today, I am honored to share more about our work and emphasize the importance of community partnerships in addressing the needs of our youth and elderly populations.

Children and Youth Services

Our flagship program is the Queen Louise Home for Children, a safe haven providing residential foster care for children who have been abused, neglected, abandoned, or require respite care. The children in this program are housed in two cottages, where our primary goal is to create a safe space for them to receive love, build trust, and grow in a nurturing environment that promotes healing and personal development.

In recent years, the program has evolved due to changes in legislation, notably the Family First Prevention Services Act, signed into law on February 9, 2018. This act reformed federal child welfare funding by redirecting resources to prevention services for families and limiting funding for residential group homes. The key provisions of this act aim to expand prevention services for children and families at imminent risk of entering the foster care system, focusing on placements in family foster care homes rather than group settings.

As a result, the Queen Louise Home now rarely houses young children under 12 for extended periods. Instead, we provide emergency placements and remain prepared to lovingly welcome children 24/7. Our program has also expanded to serve adolescent girls, up to the age of 22, who benefit from our focus on equipping them with the social, emotional, and life skills needed to transition into adulthood with confidence and purpose. These placements are made in partnership with the Department of Human Services.

This transition has provided us with an opportunity to deepen our impact, offering love, guidance, and comprehensive support that sets these girls on a path to success. We believe in engaging our youth in positive activities that mirror a healthy family dynamic. Whether participating in community events, practicing sports, or learning life skills, our team is dedicated to building self-esteem, fostering healthy relationships, and supporting their emotional development. Our mission is to ensure that Queen Louise Home is a place where children and young adults feel truly loved, safe, and supported.

Alongside Queen Louise Home Cottages A & B is our Sister Emma Cottage, located on the same campus. This specialized program offers intensive 24-hour residential care for children and young adults with severe developmental and physical disabilities, many of whom are nonverbal and require constant care and attention. Our staff at Sister Emma Cottage are specially trained to meet the complex developmental, physical, and medical needs of these residents while also creating an environment where they can experience love, joy, comfort, and dignity. The services include a contracted pediatrician and nurses, depending on the needs of the children currently in care. We partner with therapists and other providers to meet the needs of the children and young adults in the program. Like our other cottages, all placements to Sister Emma Cottage are made in partnership with the Department of Human Services.

Additionally, we operate the Early Head Start Program, which provides early childhood education, health, and developmental services to children from birth to age three, as well as to pregnant mothers. Through this program, we address the critical developmental needs of our youngest community members. This early intervention is crucial in preparing children for future educational success and in providing parents with the tools they need to support their child's growth. We work hand-in-hand with families to ensure that these children are given a strong foundation that will benefit them throughout their lives.

Services for Seniors

Our commitment to the Virgin Islands community extends to our elderly population at Flamboyant Gardens on St. Croix, Ebenezer Gardens on St. Thomas, and Genip Gardens in Frederiksted. We provide safe and affordable housing for low-income seniors. While our senior apartments are designed for independent living, the limited availability of affordable beds in assisted living or nursing home facilities has led us to accommodate a more frail and older population. Our dedicated team is committed to creating an environment where residents feel valued and supported in their later years.

Our residents consider the community a family, and our team members are often the only constant faces in some of their lives. We celebrate birthdays, Thanksgiving dinners, Christmas carols, and special occasions together. We also coordinate activities that build togetherness, particularly for residents who do not receive family visits. Community groups have adopted our residents, frequently planning activities such as Bible studies, choir concerts, bingo games, and providing volunteer advisors to assist with will and trust documents.

Our staff spend time with our seniors daily, assisting those who require help with laundry, housekeeping, and meal planning. Seniors also have access to a part-time nurse who provides personalized health care services, including monitoring prescriptions, coordinating medical attention when needed, and offering regular health check-ups. The nurse is readily available

to help residents manage their illnesses and treatment plans, providing both care and encouragement during challenging times.

We focus on fostering community and social connections through regular events, mental wellness check-ins, and mobility assistance. I am proud to say that through these efforts, we help our seniors live fuller, more engaged lives.

Adult Assisted Living and Group Homes (St. Thomas & St. Croix)

LSSVI operates two 24-hour residential care programs that provide a safe and supportive home environment for adults with developmental and physical disabilities. These homes offer medical support, physical therapy, and various programs to help residents lead healthy and fulfilling lives. The Ginger Thomas Home in St. Croix, established in 1999, and the Yellow Cedar Home in St. Thomas, established in 1993, are integral to our community. Placements to these group homes are made in partnership with the Department of Human Services, ensuring that residents receive the appropriate care and support they need.

Adults with Disabilities

LSSVI provides housing and comprehensive support services for adults with disabilities who are capable of living independently. Through our federally-funded rental assistance program, our staff offers apartment management, maintenance services, and additional support to help these individuals maintain their independence. Many of the individuals in our program face the challenges of mental illness. We are committed to respecting their privacy while providing the necessary support to navigate one of the most challenging health situations one can endure.

Natural Disaster Support

In partnership with the National Lutheran Disaster Response program, LSSVI provides crucial relief and recovery services in times of major disasters. Our Response program is activated to coordinate comprehensive support through every phase of recovery, from family case management and referrals to assistance with home reconstruction and mitigation work. This partnership ensures that our community has the resources and support needed to rebuild and recover in the aftermath of natural disasters.

How Are These Programs Funded?

- We receive most of our funds from local and federal government grants and contracts to support our programs and services
- We rely heavily on financial support from generous donors, including individuals, foundations, businesses, and other organizations, to supplement our funding.

Challenges and the Need for Support

Despite our successes, we face growing challenges. Rising costs of living, insurance premiums, and the constant maintenance required to keep our facilities safe for residents put a strain on our resources. Additionally, the emotional and physical toll on our staff is significant. We encourage self-care but need to implement more training and wellness

programs to help our team cope with burnout. We need continued support from our community and government to increase and maintain these efforts.

Thank You and a Call for Continued Partnership

We cannot do this work alone, and we have not had to do this work alone. I want to take a moment to thank the many individuals, businesses, and organizations who have supported and continue to support our programs. I also want to thank the Governor, the Legislature, the Department of Human Services, and other governmental agencies. It is through your partnerships that we can continue to meet the pressing needs of our youth, elderly populations, and other vulnerable individuals that we serve. Your support is crucial as we strive to continue to provide quality care and support to the many vulnerable people in our community. Together, we can ensure that every child, every senior, and every family in the Virgin Islands has the opportunity to live with dignity, respect, and hope for the future.

I thank you for your time and for your commitment to our community. I am confident that with your continued support, we can make a lasting impact on the lives of those who need us most.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Junia John-Straker', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Junia John-Straker
Chief Executive Officer