



June 20, 2023

Honorable Angel Bolques, Jr., Senator-At-Large  
Chair, Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports & Parks  
35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands  
Legislature of the Virgin Islands  
P.O. BOX 1690  
St. Thomas, USVI 00802

## **Testimony Re: University of the Virgin Islands Center for Excellence in Leadership and Learning (UVI CELL) Coral Wings Aviation Program**

Good day, Honorable Chair Angel Bolques Jr., members of the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports & Parks, other members of the 35th Legislature, and to the listening and viewing audience. My name is Dr. Suzanne Darrow-Magras, and I am the Director of the University of the Virgin Islands Center for Excellence in Leadership and Learning (UVI CELL). It is an honor for me to appear before you today to share information on the UVI CELL Aviation Program, Coral Wings. Here with me today is UVI CELL Program Specialist and Coral Wings Project Coordinator, Mrs. Janet Gonzalez - Rosario. This testimony will focus on the Coral Wings Aviation Program to create aviation career opportunities for the youth of the Virgin Islanders, with the intent to establish a sustainable program, along with much-needed infrastructure and opportunities to address current and future needs for the territory.

### **Coral Wings Program Introduction**

Offered through UVI CELL, Coral Wings is a new initiative in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) that introduces, educates, and trains high school students, ages 16 and older, and promote careers in aviation. The project creates and delivers a curriculum to prepare students to become Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV/drone) operators and/or private pilots. The program will provide training infrastructure, facilities, developmental programs, and sustainability through cooperation with local, regional, and national aviation stakeholders.

Coral Wings aims to promote workforce development of underserved populations, providing clear and achievable pathways to careers in aviation. In a market projected to increase by 13% from 2020 to 2030, this is a projected increase of 14,700 new jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Airline and Commercial Pilots, 2022). Furthermore, the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV/drone) pilot market is projected to grow at a rate of 51.1% over the forecast period 2019-2027, with an estimated 100,000 jobs by 2025 (Drone Service Market to 2027, The Insight Partners, 2019). The flight industry requirement for commercial pilots is projected to increase by 9% from 2019 to 2029, which is much faster than the average of all occupations, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020).

## **The Goals and Objectives of the Program**

Coral Wings' singular goal is to inspire and enable the next generation of flight professionals in the USVI. This goal requires a multifaceted approach that enhances knowledge, accessibility, support, long-term infrastructure, and community development to provide opportunities for the next generation of aviators.

Coral Wings aims to promote aviation in the USVI through:

1. Establishment of an outreach and aviation careers program for the community, schools, and industry.
2. Establishment of Coral Wings UAV Pilot Training Program to train students in the basics of aircraft and flight to provide early qualifications and transferable flight skills for a career in the aviation industry. 240 students will receive training to be eligible for FAA Part 107 commercial drone pilot certificate.
3. Establishment of the merit-based Coral Wings Pilot Training Program, allowing selected students to achieve a Private Pilot License (PPL). Over 100 students will get the opportunity to complete Part 1 of the program that consists of theory course work and an experience flight. 20 of these students will obtain the solo milestone (Part 2, includes Aviation Medical Exam and FAA Written Exam) and 5 students will complete their FAA Private Pilots Certificate (Part 3, 80 hours of in-aircraft training with an instructor and complete the FAA oral and practical exams).
4. Formation of the Next-Generation Caribbean Aviation Advisory (NCAA), which will be a team of key stakeholders for the aviation industry that will allow for the establishment of strong links between stakeholders and the next generation of USVI aviators.

## **Grant details**

The grant that funds Coral Wings is the 'Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Aviation Workforce Development Grants - Aircraft Pilots Grant'. On October 5, 2018, the President signed the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018. In section 625 of the act, Congress addressed the projected shortages of aircraft pilots in the aviation industry by giving the FAA the authority to establish an Aviation Workforce Development Grant Program to expand the aircraft pilot workforce and provide aviation education designed to prepare students to become aircraft pilots, aerospace engineers, or unmanned aircraft systems operators, and support the related professional development of teachers. Congress approved the program through the end of fiscal year 2023.

We applied for the grant in March 2022 and we were approved in February, 2023. The grant start date is March 1, 2023, with an end date of February 27, 2023. This is a duration of one year, with the option to apply for a year-long extension to meet program goals. The total amount of the award is \$499,301.00. The aviation program budget has been submitted with this testimony.

The following personnel and partners are involved on the grant and there may be opportunities to expand partnerships based on program logistics and needs: Dr. Suzanne Darrow-Magras, (Program Director, UVI CELL), Mrs. Janet Gonzalez-Rosario, (Project Coordinator, UVI CELL), Mrs. Marlene Parrott-Gokool (Program Administrator, UVI CELL), Ms. Ayopha Stalliard (Test Center Coordinator, UVI CELL), Dr. Joanne Luciano and Dr. Ashley Matchett (Aviation Subject Matter Experts/Consultants), Mr. Matthew Stewart, Owner UFLYVI (Private Pilot Program), Mr. Daryl Wade, Owner, VI Aerial Solutions (UAV Program).

The FAA Grant includes the districts of St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix and will establish the following:

1. Coordination of Coral Wings outreach activities, the UAV (drone) Pilot program, and the Private Pilot program, and establishment of the the Next-Generation Caribbean Aviation Advisory team (NCAA).
2. Procurement of drones (20 per campus), laptops (10 each island), and one FAA-certified Flight Simulator (Redbird TD2) in both districts for student use, as well as technical and curriculum support materials and security equipment for the test centers. All equipment will be located and accessible within the UVI Innovation Centers on each campus.
3. Delivery of UAV (drone) Course Instruction (theory and practical).
4. Delivery of Pilot Instruction (theory and practical)
5. Establishment of FAA Testing Centers in both districts. Previously students and aviation professionals had to travel to Puerto Rico or Florida for testing.

### **Key Stakeholders**

The key stakeholders for the program are the FAA, the UVI/UVI CELL Coral Wings Team members previously mentioned, the Government of the Virgin Islands including the VI Port Authority, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Education, to include the VI high schools, both private and public, their students, and the Career and Technical Education Center (CTEC) Aviation Academy. Key stakeholders also include the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals, (OBAP)/ VI ACE Academy, VI Chapter Tuskegee Airmen, Love City Flying Club, the aviation and airline industry, and others from the emerging VI aviation community. Stakeholders not specifically mentioned will be invited to join the Next-Generation Caribbean Aviation Advisory team through public advertising.

### **Processes Presently Underway**

- Program development and planning of USVI tailored curriculum for the drone and pilot programs, including parental permission forms and safety waivers.
- Purchasing, receiving, and installing of program equipment
- Identifying the schedule and locations for training and testing. The 10-month private pilot program consists of one Cohort and combines after-school instruction and intensive summer programs. The UAV/drone pilot program is 3 months in length, with four planned Cohorts. Both programs will start in late Summer 2023.
- Finalizing contracts with training partners
- Program outreach meetings with high school teachers, schools, and OBAP VI Director Granville (Theo) Smith and VI Chapter Tuskegee Airmen President, Carmen Heywood and Youth Club Coordinator Cenita Heywood.
- Exploring contact with local stakeholders and affiliates to discuss partnerships and collaborations through the UVI Office of Institutional Advancement
- Promotion and announcement of the Coral Wings aviation program through a UVI press release, through local media support of the grand opening of the UVI 13D Research and Strategy Innovation Center on St. Thomas, and the Virgin Islands Police Department Drone Competition on St. Croix.
- Advertising and promotion of the aviation program to all public and private schools via emails and program flyers through social media. Currently, both public and private students may express their interest in joining the program through completion of an online form, and 82 students have responded to date. A copy of the program flyer with QR code to the interest form has been provided with this testimony.

The chart below outlines the number of applicants by school district and school type (public/private) to date:

District	School Type and # of students		Total
	Public	Private	
St. Croix	37	16	53
St. Thomas/St. John	15	14	29
Total	52	30	82

### Next Steps

- Increase direct student outreach and liaison activities in the classroom, with teachers and students, provide brief demonstrations with drones and VR-Goggle flight simulators.
- Begin Phase 1 of the UAV program with an introduction to drones.
- Begin Phase 1 of the Pilot program, with theory and discovery flights.
- Advertise and convene the first meeting of the Next-Generation Caribbean Aviation Advisory team

### Current Obstacles, Challenges and Where the Legislature Can Assist

Our biggest obstacles and challenges revolve around program funding and sustainability. The Legislature may assist by allocating additional funding to UVI for aviation programming to allow for more students to participate, to expand partnerships and ensure for program longevity. Examples of funding needs:

- The private pilot license program is merit-based and will be delivered in 3 parts. While up to 100 high school students, ages 16 and older due to certification requirements, will participate in Part 1, (theory courses and 60-minute experience flight), only 20 students from the Cohort will move to Part 2, which requires completion of an Aviation Medical Exam, the passing of the FAA PPL written exam and pre-solo ground time. From there, a final group of only 5 students will go on to Part 3 and receive 80 hours of in-aircraft training with an instructor and complete the FAA oral and practical exams. Due to the rising costs of fuel and flight instructors, we are not able to offer Parts 2 and 3 to more students. The per-student cost for all 3 parts of the program is \$30,885.
- The grant did not include travel funds for the Program Coordinator or instructors to travel inter-island for meetings with schools, student training and outreach programs and limited funding was included for advertising, social media and web development.
- In regards to sustainability, we expect to apply for another FAA grant, and we are a willing and collaborative partner on other interagency grants. Through UVI's Institutional Advancement Office, we will look to partner with a large, local aviation leader who can serve as our sponsor and provide on-the-job training and employment opportunities. We will also lease utilization of the FAA simulators to aviation professionals and outside students for training hours, and offer test center access to all in the USVI. As approved Department of

Labor providers, we will utilize Department of Labor Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds to offset training costs and help establish aviation apprenticeships that utilize our Related Training Instruction (RTI). This will allow us to tap into apprenticeship funding. We are also open to philanthropic donations to our efforts.

Chairman Bolques, this concludes my testimony. Thank you for the invitation to provide information about the Coral Wings Aviation Program. I thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee and welcome any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Suzanne Darrow-Magras".

**Suzanne Darrow-Magras, PhD**  
Director, UVI CELL

**About UVI CELL:**

UVI CELL was established in 2002 to meet the workforce and professional development training needs critical to the economic prosperity of the Virgin Islands. With facilities and staff on both University of the Virgin Islands campuses, UVI CELL is committed to supporting the intellectual and professional development and transformation of students and the workforce in the Virgin Islands, wider Caribbean, and the world as part of the University's mission; and to serve as the premier institute for personal enrichment and consultancy, locally and globally through innovative leadership and collaborative partnerships. UVI CELL is accredited through the International Accreditors for Continuing Education and Training (IACET).