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Sion Farm Shopping Center
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November 20, 2023

Good morning, distinguished Senators of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands and the listening public. I am Monique Bute, Executive Director of Virgin Islands Association for Independent Living. A non-profit organization serving the community for forty-two years in the United State Virgin Islands that enables persons with disabilities to live an independent lifestyle within the community. This includes all disabilities, allowing all disabled people who would like to learn a skill to live as independently as possible.

We have two locations serving the Virgin Islands. One on St. Croix located at Sion Farm Shopping Center. Another on St. Thomas located at Wheatley Center 2. Our mandates require that our staff be 50% plus one, as well as our board members. Our staff includes three full-time staff of which two have disabilities. And four part-time employees and three contract personnel, all with disabilities. There are currently six staff members on St. Thomas and one part-time on St. Croix. We need to hire personnel to meet our shortage on St. Croix, but additional funding is needed to accomplish this task. We are in a transitional period right now with the change in leadership and new staff still learning their duties.

We have five (5) core services.

The first core service is Independent Living Skills training. Which includes training new consumers how to develop IL (Independent Living) Skills such as prepare meals, Self-confidence and self-esteem, Budgeting, and decision-making skills. We do not provide housing units; we provide training so an individual with a disability can manage their own home or apartment, along with other training.

The second core service is Peer to peer counseling where persons with similar disabilities work together to solve individual problems. They have group peer support meeting called M.A.S.H. which stands for Mutual Aid Self-Help Group, which meets every other Thursday on St. Thomas and every third Wednesday of each month on St. Croix.

The third core service is information and referrals. This is where we may refer a consumer to another agency or nonprofit for services, or just answer their

questions. We can provide persons with disabilities Vitran Plus applications, Library for the Blind, Interpreter listing, and assist in filling out benefits applications, job applications, etc.

The fourth core service is Advocacy. Where we teach individuals with disabilities to self-representation, individual empowerment, in other words to use their voices.

And the fifth core service is Transitional Services where we can provide transitional services for youths coming out of school to a home environment. From an institution or nursing home to an apartment of their own. Our if someone is at risk of entering an institution that only needs some skills to be able to live independently as possible.

We also provide Assistive technology assistance, ADA Education, Systems Advocacy, and sensitivity awareness training.

We currently serve approximately 160 consumers annually. Down from 223 since covid in 2020. We have lost a lot of consumers through them passing away, moving away for better medical care, or just dropped their goals because they did not want to come out in covid. We are rebuilding our consumer base slowly. We have walk-ins and telephone inquiries regularly. We only count consumers once per year even if they come daily for different services. The list for qualifying disabilities has expanded to include an array of health disabilities; so many people who might not have qualified before can now qualify for services. We a just letting the community at large now we are here to serve so give us a call to make an appointment for an intake.

I would like to remind everyone that disabilities can affect a person at any time. Some people are born with a disability, whereas others acquire one along the way. And we all should be sensitive to a person with a disability. Ask them if they need assistance or accommodation, do not assume that they do. People with disabilities do not be shame to receive help when it is offered if you need assistance or accommodation. Employers remember that an employee can ask for reasonable accommodation to perform their duties. If your employee requests people acknowledge they are there when they enter a room with them, if they are blind or deaf, is not an unreasonable request. Announcing yourself so they are aware that there are other people in the room with them takes no time out of one's day to accomplish. This goes hand in hand with sensitivity to other people's needs.

All business establishments need to be accessible to individuals with disabilities with seating that a person can get in and out of without struggling or jumping in or out of them. Business owners please assess your establishment and if you have such items in your establishment remove or replace them with suitable items.

Government agencies need to remember this too. Having a press conference without an interpreter, especially through a natural disaster is not acceptable. Having an event and having no accessible seating or using the accessible seating for other things is not acceptable. Sidewalks need to be properly painted and noted. As the leaders of this community, you should set the standard for accessibility in all areas of the government, it does not matter which branch of government you are in.

And to the community, please be mindful for people with disabilities traversing our streets. Parking on sidewalks is not acceptable. Because if a person is visually impaired and has been trained to walk the sidewalk to their destination; this throws off their sense of direction and can cause that person to get confused and not know where they are. Persons using disability parking permits please be mindful that the permit is for the individual with the disability and if they are not in the vehicle using that permit is illegal. Being a good citizen and correcting yourself is needed in our community.

Of late we have run into some difficulties which will require us to relocate our St. Thomas office. We have explored a variety of other rental units for us to move our agency to. We have run into problems with getting affordable rental spacing with prices ranging from \$80,000 & up per year for rental units that can accommodate our agency. And we will require funding to create accessible access throughout the facility.

We are also putting it on record. That we are a small nonprofit that receives funding from the Department of Human Services through a grant of \$100,000 per year along with our Federal Funds of \$256,202. With the cost of inflation & expenses increasing, it has been a struggle to make ends meet. Especially, when the local funds do not come in on time. We are still owed \$100,000 by the local government. \$50,000 for 2023 and \$50,000 for 2022. This puts us in a difficult position to cut staff hours and scale back our expenses to continue operating. For two years we have asked for increases to cover the additional expense that we incur due to inflation and both years we were denied. For the fiscal year 2024 we have again been denied an increase.

Our current vehicle on St. Thomas is eleven (11) years and have been giving us trouble of late. We need to purchase a new vehicle for St. Thomas - estimated accessible vehicle prices are approximately \$80,000 for an accessible equipped vehicle only not including shipping, registration, and insurance.

We are also looking for a new permanent home on St. Croix to house our operations on St. Croix. It must be on a bus route and close to the main roadway.

These are our staffing and other needs approximately \$300,000:

New Ask:

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Community Activity Coordinator STX

Driver STX

Program Assistant (Territory)

Peer Counselor STX

Fringe benefits

Accessible Van

Retrofitting office