

**Testimony**  
**Michael Carty, Chairman, VI Workforce Development Board**  
**Committee on Education and Workforce Development**  
**May 16, 2024**

Good day, Honorable Chairwoman, Marise James, Honorable Donna Frett-Gregory, Vice-Chair, members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, other members of the 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Michael Carty, Chairman of the VI Workforce Development Board. Here with me today are the Executive Director, Sonia Boyce and Collin Perciballi, Senior Consultant for Education & Government of Lightcast. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Board's role in the workforce development system in the Virgin Islands, specifically addressing recruitment and retention of employees, employment opportunities in the Virgin Islands Government, workforce development programs and the services provided to help people find, prepare for, and maintain employment.

Executive Order No. 490-2019 established the VI State Workforce Development Board (VISWDB) under the Office of the Governor as a policy making entity charged with strengthening the workforce development system by collaboratively building strong partnerships with secondary and post-secondary education, economic development, and the public and private sectors to align and improve economic growth in the Virgin Islands. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (Public Law 113-128) which authorizes the Board was signed into law on July 22, 2014.

The Virgin Islands Workforce Development Board offers a broad spectrum of training programs. They range from healthcare to information technology, from skilled trades to customer service, we have designed these programs to respond directly to the needs of our community and the gaps in our local labor market. Our goal is to achieve a substantial increase in program completion rates, with a significant percentage of graduates gaining employment within three months of completion. By aligning training programs with the needs of local businesses, we will address critical employment gaps. This will bolster local businesses by providing them with skilled workers and stimulate our economy by increasing the earning potential of our residents. Our Eligible Training Provider (ETP) program is a critical component of our service delivery system. The Virgin Islands Workforce Development Board's Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL) identifies training providers who qualify to receive Workforce Innovative and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds to train adults, dislocated workers, and out-of-school youth. The Board has twenty approved eligible training providers.

The US Department of Labor – Employment and Training Administration requires that the Board conduct Research and Evaluation to gauge the labor market of the territory. The Board followed the procurement process and Lightcast was chosen to conduct the analysis. A copy of the Labor Market Analysis is attached. (Attachment 1) The document is a comprehensive labor market analysis of the US Virgin Islands covering 2024-2027. It examines the labor market across various industries including Agriculture, Financial Services, Healthcare, Manufacturing, Professional and Technical Services, Tourism, and Utilities. The report discusses the challenges faced by the USVI economy, such as a decline in population, high unemployment, and natural disasters, and outlines a series of recommendations for workforce development. Key strategies include aligning education with in-demand skills, expanding the labor pool, and leveraging remote work opportunities. Additionally, it suggests policy and practice changes to address economic challenges, emphasizing education and training to supply a skilled workforce.

**Current Challenges:** The US Virgin Islands face significant labor market challenges, such as:

1. **Population Decline:** Leading to a shrinking workforce pool.
2. **High Unemployment Rates:** A persisting challenge for economic development.
3. **Natural Disasters and Economic Shocks:** Events like hurricanes and the closure of Limetree Bay Terminals have disrupted economic stability.
4. **Skills Gap:** Misalignment between education outcomes and labor market demands, especially in emerging sectors like renewable energy and healthcare.

**Key Opportunities:** Despite these challenges, there are opportunities:

1. **Emerging Industry Growth:** Healthcare, agriculture, manufacturing, financial services, and tourism show strong potential for workforce expansion.
2. **Remote Work:** The potential to attract remote workers and businesses, leveraging digital infrastructure.
3. **Resilient Workforce:** Despite disruptions, our workforce has demonstrated adaptability and resilience, providing a solid foundation for future initiatives.

**Strategic Recommendations:**

1. **Align Education and Training**
2. **Expand the Labor Pool**
3. **Leverage Remote Work Opportunities**
4. **Sector-Specific Workforce Boards**
5. **Supportive Programs for Target Populations**

The USVI stands at a pivotal moment. By addressing our labor market challenges through comprehensive workforce development strategies, we can ensure sustainable

economic growth. The comprehensive labor market analysis and WIOA Plan offer actionable solutions to bridge skill gaps, attract new talent, and bolster resilience across all sectors. This will usher in a new era of workforce prosperity in the USVI.

In addition to the strategic recommendations outlined, several specific policy ideas were also provided:

1. Strengthen Apprenticeships and On-the-Job Training.
2. Expand Digital and Virtual Learning Platforms
3. Build Sector-Specific Workforce Development Boards.
4. Encourage Employer-Based Upskilling Programs.
5. Promote Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development.
6. Improve Labor Market Data Collection and Reporting.
7. Enhance Cross-Agency Coordination.
8. Develop Community-Specific Outreach and Engagement Initiatives.
9. Encourage the Return and Retention of Island Talent.
10. Invest in Infrastructure to Support New Economic Sectors
11. Foster Government-to-Business Collaboration for Skills Development.
12. Launch Youth-Engagement and Mentorship Programs.
13. Expand Support Services for Target Populations.
14. Establish a Green Workforce Task Force.

These comprehensive policy ideas align with the strategic goals outlined in the Comprehensive Labor Market Analysis and the VI's WIOA State Plan. Their implementation will help address labor market challenges, expand training opportunities, and create a more resilient workforce.

The Board has partnered with Metrix Learning to provide Career Pathways exploration tools, skill assessment, skill gap analysis, and remediation courses free to all Virgin Islanders. Here are the latest statistics of Metrix Learning utilization across the territory:

1. 689 Individuals have registered for the online training.
2. 1343 courses have been completed.
3. 27 individuals have requested the courses and vouchers for the OSHA credential.
4. 20 different organizations/departments across the territories are having their participants register for the courses.

The Virgin Islands American Job Center (AJC) serves as a vital hub for workforce development initiatives in the territory. As a partner within the AJC, Equus Workforce Solutions is responsible for providing Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) title 1 services to Adult and Dislocated Workers in the territory. These services include Career and Training services aimed at assisting individuals find, prepare for, and maintain

gainful employment. Their mission is centered on empowering individuals to achieve economic self-sufficiency through employment.

Services provided by the VI AJC daily includes:

1. Personalized career counseling which helps job seekers explore career pathways.
2. Job Search assistance, including access to job listings and labor market data.
3. In person and virtual workshops for resume development, Interview preparation, and Job Readiness.
4. Individualized Skills assessments and training referrals which connect participants with sector-based training programs to equip them with in-demand skills for high growth industries in the territory.
5. Supportive services such as transportation assistance, childcare assistance, and access to services that remove specific barriers to employment.

Along with the employment and career services mentioned, their Business Services Consultants on St Thomas and St Croix actively engages with employers to understand their workforce needs and strives to bridge the gap between employers and job seekers. A valuable resource they utilize to meet this goal is the implementation of work-based learning opportunities, including Work Experience Programs (WEX) and On-The Job Training Programs (OJT).

The WEX program focuses on providing individuals new to the workforce with opportunities to gain work related skills and experience through short term placements in real work environments. They offer valuable skills development, networking, & resume building opportunities.

The OJT Program is designed to provide more practical, hands-on training in specific job roles. This program typically involves a combination of classroom instruction and supervised work experience, allowing individuals to earn while they learn with a guaranteed job placement at the end of the training. They have had incredible success with the WESTIN at Frenchman Reef's adoption of their OJT program this year, which is currently facilitating the training and placement of 15-20 job seekers monthly on St Thomas.

The Virgin Islands Workforce Development Board thank you for the support you give workforce development in our community. I welcome the opportunity to respond to any questions you may have.