

**Testimony**  
**Executive Director, Sonia Boyce**  
**Committee on Education and Workforce Development**  
**May 24, 2023**

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 Sonia Boyce, Executive Director of the VI Workforce Development Board representing Chairman of the Board Michael Carty. Chairman Carty is unable to attend today's meeting due to a prior commitment. Thank you for the opportunity to provide a status update regarding workforce development in the Virgin Islands.

The VI Workforce Development Board (VI WDB) is 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 VISWDB leads efforts of employer engagement, conducts program oversight of local adult, dislocated worker, and youth workforce activities. In addition, the Board identifies eligible training providers for adult and dislocated workers, negotiates and works to establish local performance accountability measures. The VISWDB oversees the competitive selection of the One Stop Operator and Providers, designates and certifies the one-stop operator through a competitive process and may terminate for cause the eligibility of such operators, and coordinate activities with education and training providers including providers of workforce investment activities,

providers of adult education, career and technical education and local agencies administering plans under Title 1.

The Virgin Islands Workforce Development Board recognizes the need to increase our outreach efforts into the Virgin Islands communities. The Board has created a media and marketing plan to reach out to job seekers and businesses across the territory to inform them of services available to them at the American Job Center. We will continue to support the outreach efforts of our One-Stop Operator Equus Workforce Solutions, the Virgin Islands Department of Labor, and our WIOA (Workforce Innovative Opportunity Act) core partners to identify available job seekers and address the skill shortages of many employers. This includes job fairs, outreach events, webinars, podcasts, radio, newspaper advertising and partnering with many different organizations.

The Virgin Islands Workforce Development Board is dedicated to strengthening and improving the workforce in the USVI, which is a critical component of our economic vitality. Through collaboration with public and private stakeholders, we aim to promote a flexible, innovative, and effective workforce system within the territory. Our programs encompass a broad range of residents from youth to adults, with a significant focus on providing opportunities for those who face barriers to employment. We offer training in high-demand sectors such as healthcare, construction, hospitality, and administrative services.

We are looking ahead to strengthening our partnerships with local businesses and educational institutions. This is to ensure our training programs align with the needs of employers and the local economy, and to provide an

avenue for Virgin Islanders to receive the skills necessary for the jobs of tomorrow. The Board has begun a series of business engagement events across the territory. We started with Board members and will continue into the wider community. We believe that stakeholder involvement is key in developing effective policies. We actively seek input from local businesses, educational institutions, and community organizations. This collaboration will help us ensure that our policies are responsive to the needs of employers, workers, and the broader community.

Our Eligible Training Provider (ETP) program is a critical component of our service delivery system. The ETP program provides access to training services that are directly linked to occupations in demand within the Virgin Islands. It includes a wide array of providers who offer comprehensive programs that meet the needs of our diverse workforce. We currently have nineteen board approved eligible training providers.

Our Apprenticeship Program is a proven approach to preparing workers for in-demand jobs and meeting the needs of business. It combines job-related technical instruction with structured on-the-job learning experiences. We have apprenticeships in a variety of high-demand sectors, including construction trades, healthcare/allied health, leisure and hospitality, and the marine industry.

The One-Stop Operator plays a critical role in bringing together a multitude of workforce services in a single location, serving both job seekers and employers. It provides a broad range of services, such as job search and placement assistance, skills assessment, and career counseling. Partnerships

with our WIOA core partners are aimed at aligning our training programs with postsecondary education opportunities and employer needs. This collaborative effort ensures that our trainees have a clear pathway to high-demand occupations and that our local employers have access to a well-trained and educated workforce.

The vocational training programs are designed to equip participants with the practical skills necessary to perform various jobs. These programs focus on areas such as construction trades, culinary arts, and healthcare, among others. Our goal is to provide individuals with the necessary skills to both meet the needs of local employers and build a sustainable career.

Our agriculture programs aim to develop a new generation of farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs. We are researching various training programs in modern farming techniques, agribusiness management, and even niche areas like organic farming and aquaponics to offer Virgin Islanders. The US Department of Labor has hosted meetings with the VI Workforce Development Board, UVI CELL and the Hawaii State Workforce Agency to begin peer-to-peer discussions on creating agriculture career pathways in the territory. The goal is to get more Virgin Islanders interested in the agriculture industry, create a more resilient local food system, and provide meaningful employment opportunities in the sector.

As technology advances rapidly, it is crucial that our workforce development policies adapt accordingly to ensure our training programs remain relevant and effective. This includes staying abreast of changes in technology that impact the skills needs of employers in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Board will create policies to incorporate more digital literacy and artificial intelligence training into our programs, given the increasing importance of these skills across multiple industries. In the renewable energy sector, we will update our policies to ensure we are providing training on the latest solar and wind technology.

Our upcoming Workforce Development Summit is a key event in our annual calendar. The summit serves as a platform for sharing best practices, discussing emerging trends, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders in workforce development. It brings together representatives from local businesses, educational institutions, government agencies, and community organizations. The agenda for this year's summit includes sessions on various topics such as the impact of technology on the workforce, the role of apprenticeships in building the skilled workforce, and the strategies for promoting entrepreneurship. We have invited a diverse group of local speakers who are experts in these areas. The summit will provide ample opportunities for networking and collaboration, with designated time for attendees to engage in discussions and share ideas. The expected outcomes include new partnerships, actionable strategies for addressing workforce challenges, and a shared understanding of the priorities for workforce development in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Some of the Virgin Islands Workforce Development Board's plans include hosting a forum with our WIOA core partners to facilitate a solution to the housing issue the is currently being experienced by the workforce and partnering with the Department of Human Services to expand non-traditional childcare hours across the territory.

The Virgin Islands Workforce Development Board is committed to working collaboratively with the members of the 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature, and we thank you for the support you give workforce development in our community. I welcome the opportunity to respond to any questions you may have.