FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER, INC.
2317 Commandant Gade
St. Thomas, VI 00802
340-776-3966 / 24-hr Hotline 340-776-STOP (7867)

"The Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services"

Testifier: *Ms. Anya Stuart, Executive Director, Family Resource Center, Inc. of St. Thomas, St. John and Water Island*

Testimony: "FRC's Perspective on *Mental Health in our Communities"*

Good morning to all Senators of the 35th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands, the supporting staff, the listening and viewing audiences. I am Anya Stuart, the Executive Director of Family Resource Center, a private non-profit agency serving victims of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and other violent crimes in the district of St. Thomas, St. John and Water Island. Our agency is a 24-hour operation to include staff and trained volunteers. I thank you for giving me the opportunity to present to you today from the perspective of responding to the needs and hardships that victim of crimes faces, and the effects on the status of Mental Health in our communities.

Victims of crime are more prone to further and increase violent crime because of the imposed vulnerability. At Family Resource Center, for example we know that many victims of crime experience set-backs that they have much difficulty recuperating from. Many of these lead to further victimization, the need for resources that may be limited or unavailable, compromised medical, physical, emotional and mental health, joblessness and homelessness. It is proven that associated illnesses such as mental health affects the quality of life in our Virgin Islands. We are a region separated geographically, with limited available and affordable resources. This creates layers of hardship for many who are already economically challenged.

~Victims of crime may need access to medical care, without the ability to pay for the associated costs.

~Victims of crime may need medications for their resulting illnesses.

~Victims of crime may need counseling services, short or long term that `may not be readily available.

~Victims of crime may lose wages due to the inability to work as a result of damages endured from the crime.

~Victims of crime may have issues affecting their eligibility for programs that can offer relief.

~Victims of crime may feel shame or responsible for what they succumbed to, therefore some do not seek support or resources for relief.

~Victims of crime may fear retaliation, and therefore retreat to avoid further victimization to them, or their family members.

~Victims of crime may incur hardships and unkind exposure due to necessary court proceedings against the perpetrator of the crime.

When a person is victimized and is unable to bear the costs of recovery, programs and funding that aim to provide support may be strained for periods of time, which were not forecasted.   In our territory, some agencies have been unable to continue providing services, or have had to reduce staffing and programming, creating a lack in community resources, and an increase in the need for services, for existing agencies. Funding shortfalls have been a common thread, resulting in these detrimental reductions.

Many youths are experiencing the crime of domestic violence and or sexual assault crisis within their homes, which is translating into behaviors of anger and rebelliousness in their homes and schools, at all grade levels.   Young mothers and fathers show evidence that they are incapable of providing financial, emotional, or spiritual nurturing for their children and express that there is "nowhere to turn" when faced with singular or combinations of these hardships. On St. Thomas and on this island of St. John, many crimes of area youth go unreported and/or unpunished because of family ties. Residents also express the fear of "getting involved" and of reluctance in speaking to law enforcement, for fear of retaliation and further victimization.

Mental health in the United States Virgin Islands has been a focus of attention, especially following the significant impact of the 2017 hurricanes (Maria and Irma) and the COVID-19. The aftermath of these natural disasters and a pandemic saw a dire need for mental health due to the closure of facilities and a shortage of medical professionals. Although, there have been efforts to improve services and support systems. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, particularly for the youth. Recent reports align with local data indicating a mental health crisis among children, with high levels of anxiety and depression intensified by the COVID-19.

Addressing mental health issues is a multifaceted challenge that requires a comprehensive approach. Strategies to improve mental health include maintaining a positive outlook, practicing gratitude, and taking care of one's physical health through exercise, adequate sleep, and healthy eating. It's also crucial to seek professional help when needed, engage in social activities with supportive peers, and avoid harmful self-medication practices. Mindfulness and creative outlets can serve as therapeutic tools, and it's important to avoid negative social comparisons that can

impact mental well-being. Each individual's journey to better mental health is unique, and these strategies can be tailored to fit personal needs and circumstances. Implementing these practices into daily life can contribute to improved mental health and overall quality of life.

Improving mental health within our community is an intricate effort that requires a collective approach. Strategies include promoting social presence and support, which can help improve feelings of isolation and loneliness, often precursors to mental health issues. Community-based interventions, such as those identified in a study mapping local policy and practice, have shown that addressing social isolation through activities and befriending services is prevalent and beneficial. Additionally, integrating mental health services with other community services can provide a more holistic approach to wellbeing. For instance, creating more green spaces can reduce the risk of mental health disorders and foster a sense of community. Ensuring that interventions are inclusive and address the needs of diverse groups within the community, such as older adults, minority ethnic backgrounds, and LGBTQ+ individuals, is also crucial for a comprehensive mental health strategy. Moreover, consistent evaluation of these interventions is necessary to assess their effectiveness and adapt them to better serve the community's needs. By combining these efforts, communities can create a supportive environment that promotes mental health and wellbeing for all its members.

The residents of our territory are to be commended. I know that contributing factors include programs like those at Family Resource Center such as, the Women Anger Management- Women of Worth sessions, the Men Terminating Violence program, the Family and Youth Crisis Intervention program which features Parenting Skills classes, Adolescents programming, along with outreach events at schools, churches, community and civic events, court advocacy and one-on-one no-cost to victims counseling sessions. All of these offerings address healthy relationships at home, work and within the community. Resources like these must continue, if the safety of our residents and communities are to be improved.

Thank you _____ for the opportunity to testify before you today.

End.