

**35<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands**  
**Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services**  
**The Honorable Ray Fonseca, Chairman**

*Testimony on “Mental Health from (the VIDE) perspective...to include, in part, the frequency and types of interactions with persons perceived to have mental disabilities...and the value of the comprehensive data being assembled to better understand and address a persistent social disorder plaguing our community.”*

**Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.**  
**Commissioner of Education**  
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THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF  
**EDUCATION**

Good-morning, to the Honorable Ray Fonseca, Chairman of the Health, Hospitals and Human Services Committee, other Committee members of the 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature, other testifiers, and my fellow Virgin Islanders. I am Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D., Commissioner of Education, along with my colleagues:

- Stefan V. Jurgen, Ph.D., Insular Superintendent, St. Thomas-St. John
- Karen Chancellor, Acting Deputy Superintendent, St. Croix
- Tanya Lockhart, Ed.D., District Director of Special Education, St. Croix
- Rhona Pinney-Simon, District Director, Student Services, St. Thomas-St. John
- Gisele Schjang, Social Emotional Wellness Program Manager, St. Croix

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (hereinafter VIDE/the Department) is here today to testify on *“Mental Health from our perspective to include, in part, the frequency and types of interactions with persons (students) perceived to have mental disabilities and the value of the comprehensive data being assembled to better understand and address a persistent social disorder plaguing our community.”*

The Department fully supports promoting mental health education and awareness as it is beneficial to our students’ social-emotional learning. The VIDE plays a pivotal role in increasing students’ and community awareness about mental health as awareness through education is the first step to reduce the stigma attached to mental health. Mental illness is generally misunderstood but we are all faces of mental stress. While we may not be the homeless person walking the streets of Frederiksted, Savan or Cruz Bay, we are the ones who live with depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and anxiety every day as we go about the business of living a

normal life; that is until something triggers an episode. Then we are faced with the true reality of the mental health crisis in the Virgin Islands.

Presently, the Department interacts daily with public and private therapeutic institutions in providing a wrap-around standard of care for students with issues related to mental health. The Safe and Healthy Students Program, the Edith Williams Alternative Academy (EWAA), and the Youth Rehabilitation Center provide these services to all students as identified by their school teams or the court system. Our school counselors also play an integral role in providing support and referrals for our students.

For students with disabilities who demonstrate the need for mental health assistance, the Division of Special Education in both districts provide individualized counseling to students. The area of mental health is **not** an area categorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) under special education whereby individualized specialized services are rendered, however, IDEA does recognize students with emotional disorders (ED). When mental health services become necessary outside the scope of what special education can offer, assistance is sought either publicly or privately to cater to the individualized need of the students. As such, even though one may hypothesize that a specific type of disability may be predisposed to require mental health services, mental health crises do not discriminate. All disability categories can be affected.

### **MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS SERVICES TO STUDENTS IN THE ST. CROIX DISTRICT**

Schools in the St. Croix District play the most important role in providing a comprehensive learning support system for students. A major component of the learning support system is the emotional wellbeing of and mental health services to students. The school based support services for students include school counselors providing academic, social-emotional and career development supports. School counselors focus peer support, academic counseling and guidance, and referrals. The

district's counseling program is based on the comprehensive, research-based American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model which details the knowledge and skills needed for the achievement of academic success, social-emotional development, and college/career readiness for students.

In collaboration with teachers, nurses and other educational professionals, school counselors work towards creating a positive social environment promoting healthy living, learning, and personal growth for all students. Under this domain, students frequently receive direct counseling services to help them manage their emotions and apply their interpersonal skills between their peers or adults.

Partnerships with home, community, government, not for profit and private organizations are essential and a required component of providing a strong support system. Established partnerships provide a clear roadmap for communication, delineating roles, and outlining processes and available resources and services. Regular engagement of community mental health partners and families lends for a family-centered system of approach that augments the support services and promotes positive wellbeing in schools.

Based on the ASCA Model for Social Emotional Support, school counselors utilize the multi-tiered system of supports that centers on awareness, prevention and to identify and address mental health issues in schools. Please note that school counselors provide daily intervention services and not mental health counseling; mental health activities are provided by trained mental health clinicians.

**Tier I – Supports Provided to All Students** that addresses the universal social and emotional needs of all students. School counselors guide:

- Daily individual and group sessions and classroom presentations;
- Daily individual and group sessions with community based organizations;
- Provide daily and consistent contact with students;
- Facilitate the grieving and healing processes;

- Provide clear communication of behavioral expectations in the areas of citizenship, respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, integrity, etc.;
- Monitor learning support services, and
- Reinforce activities based on the five (5) competencies of social and emotional learning (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making).

### **Tier II – Supports Provided for Mental Wellness**

- Individual and group check-ins with the school counselor focusing on managing behaviors, grieving, self-awareness, domestic and gun violence, coping skills, etc.;
- Daily individual meetings with the school counselor regarding academic achievement, performance and student success, and intervention plans;
- Progress monitoring of students' plans for behavior management, interventions employed, restorative justice and targeted support activities;
- Referral of students to health clinicians for screening and identification of mental health concerns;
- Individual and group sessions addressing behavioral health with community based organizations and partners such as the Virgin Islands Department of Health (DOH), Beautiful Dreamers, Inc., St. Croix Women's Coalition, Virgin Islands Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Council, Greater Changes, Island Therapy, and West Care; and
- DOH school based implementation the 6-week curriculum for small groups.

### **Tier III – (Expansive) Support**

- School counselors facilitate family supports with the Department of Human Services and DOH to obtain social services to close gaps,

- School counselors effectuated appropriate referrals for consultations and clinical interventions/services to outside agencies (school counselors do not provide mental health counseling), and
- Greater Changes evaluation of students to determine the need for clinical services.

### **MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS SERVICES TO STUDENTS IN THE ST. THOMAS-ST. JOHN DISTRICT**

Mental health has always been a concern in the St. Thomas-St. John District. With the support of district leaders, school administrators and counselors, educators, community stakeholders and the implementation of the district's Social Emotional Learning Unit, we have made significant strides in addressing mental health issues that confront our students.

#### **Mental Health Supports for Students and Staff**

Currently, the St. Thomas-St. John District has a referral system in place to support students' mental health needs. Teachers and/or staff can refer students to the guidance counselors, or students can seek out assistance directly from the counselor assigned to their specific grade level or school. School counselors assess students' needs, seek out parental support and offer awareness of available services and resources, and/or refer students for services that are available from public and/or private sector providers. Similar professional services are available to the staff through the Government of the Virgin Islands' (GVI), Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Supervisors can recommend that staff participate in the EAP, if there are concerns, and/or the staff can, on their own, access the EAP where they can speak to a counselor, participate in the workshops offered and/or view the EAP Wellness Webcasts available at [cigna.com/EAP](http://cigna.com/EAP) webcast.

The district continues to employ various mediums of information, including VIDE and school-based social media platforms and other electronic methods to apprise families, students, and staff of events, services, and resources that are available in the community. Information disseminated has also

included family engagement events, training opportunities, and social emotional and wellness opportunities.

### **998 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline**

Efforts have been made to ensure that students and staff are aware of the DOH's "988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline" and how they can access its resources. Posters alerting students and staff of the "988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline" are displayed at strategic locations at each school site. The posters are available in English, Spanish and Creole to meet the diverse home language of our students and staff. In addition, 988 cards and Safety Plans Work assessment tools were shared with counselors, Student Success Specialists and Deans of Students for them to distribute and to use.

### **Emotional Crisis Intervention Response and Response Team**

Both districts have an Emotional Crisis Intervention and Response Team to provide students and staff with immediate support and awareness to available resources and services during tragedies and traumatic events. The team visits the respective school sites or unit to offer a forum for reflection, to meet with students and staff collectively or individually to hear their concerns, to provide a listening ear for students and staff to express their feelings in a non-judgmental environment, and to offer emotional support. For extreme cases, students and staff are referred to public and/or private service providers for professional counseling.

### **Mental Health Activities for Students and Staff**

In the St. Thomas-St. John District, students and staff were allowed to voluntarily participate in art therapy as outlet to manage their stress levels. Art Therapy was conducted at various schools sites in the district, giving students in grades 1 to 12 and staff members an opportunity to enhance their physical, mental, and emotional well-being by using the creative art making process. This activity supported self-expression, emotional exploration, stress management, and the development of self-

awareness and built self-esteem. A total of 739 students and 110 staff members completed this activity.

#### Educational Trainings Offered to Students and Staff

- Stress Management
- Self-Care and Self-Advocacy
- Emotional Intelligence
- Managing Anger and Impulsive Behaviors
- Social Media Literacy
- Bullying Workshops
- Conflict Resolution and De-Escalation
- Disability Awareness and Sensitivity Training
- Cyberbullying and Associated Criminal Offenses
- Challenging Behaviors
- Mental Health Talks
- Substance Abuse Prevention
- Getting the Facts About Vaping
- Drug Prevention and Healthy Coping Skills
- Managing Peer Pressure
- Identifying, Preventing and Reporting Child Exploitation

During these trainings, students also learned empathy as they role-played scenarios and acquired adequate skills to handle various situations effectively. Group discussions were conducted to improve their communication skills as they learned appropriate responses. In addition, they learnt self-advocacy skills as they were made aware of the services, resources and programs that are available to them. To improve the outcomes for our at-risk students, additional supports were given to those attending the Edith Williams Alternative Academy (EWAA). At-risk students at EWAA receive increased, and on-going supports.

Collaboration is essential in maximizing the limited funding and human resources that plagues the Department. One such example is the current work between VIDE and DOH on a memorandum of understanding for mental health assistance to students and staff to increase student, staff and public awareness about mental health through, but not limited to, public service announcements, guest speakers, workshops, services from behavioral health technicians, etc. Through education, VIDE, in conjunction with the other departments, can change the face and perception of mental health, thereby reducing the stigma of mental illness. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We are available for questions.