



TESTIMONY OF PRESIDENT DAVID HALL  
UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, HOSPITALS AND  
HUMAN SERVICES

35<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE  
OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

CONFERENCE ROOM

ST. THOMAS

FEBRUARY 7, 2024

Good morning, Chairman Fonseca and members of the Committee on Health. Hospitals and Human Services and other members of the 35th Legislature present, other testifiers, members of the press, persons in the viewing and listening audience, ladies and gentlemen. My name is David Hall, President of the University of the Virgin Islands, and it is indeed an honor for me to appear before this Committee to provide testimony on Bill 35-0224, which seeks to increase access to behavioral health services, with a focus on a Psychiatric Emergency Response Team to provide mobile crisis intervention services, and the 9-8-8 telecommunication system.

The University is acutely aware of the challenges and lack of human resources regarding mental health services in the Territory. This was the impetus for the University to develop and implement a Master's in Counseling Psychology in 2010-2011. This program has produced numerous graduates who are licensed clinicians and providing services to the people of the Virgin Islands. It was also the reason we later on, with the assistance of this body, implemented a Master's in Social Work degree, which was fully accredited last year and is also producing individuals who can serve the mental health and social services needs of the people of the Virgin Islands. Despite these steps forward, the unmet need for mental health services remains, and more must be done. One could argue that the need for support has increased because of external traumatic events like hurricanes Irma and Maria, and the COVID pandemic that lasted almost two years. Research demonstrates that major natural and health disasters increase the need for mental health services and support, and therefore the Territory is probably also experiencing some of the consequences of these traumatic events. Universities nationally have seen an increase in the number of students who indicate that they have experienced mental health or emotional challenges. Thus, this demands that universities are more aware and ready to serve the needs of their students.

With that backdrop, the University fully supports Bill 35-0224, and the creation of a designated hotline center for those who are experiencing emergency situations. I am not in a position or have the specific expertise to advise about the structure and operation of the center, but the fact that it will be aligned and coordinated with nationally recognized organizations that have an outstanding track record in this area is very promising and seems to indicate that this center will operate according to best practices in the industry.

The section requiring the collection of data which will be used to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of the center and this endeavor is also critical, since too often new initiatives are created but we fail to measure their effectiveness. This Bill attempts to avoid that past practice.

I also want to highlight the section that requires the center to “serve at-risk and specialized populations ... including, but not be limited to, LGBTQ, youth, minorities, rural individuals, veterans, American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and other high-risk populations well as those with co-occurring substance use; provide linguistically and culturally competent care; and include training requirements and policies for transferring a 9-8-8 contact to an appropriate specialized center or subnetwork within the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline network.” I highlight this section because too often we assume that mental health care is a “one-size fit all” approach. The reality is that individuals in need of emotional support and mental health services

bring their whole selves to the service provider and their specific needs may vary from others. The center must be able to address or connect individuals to the culturally and linguistically appropriate persons and personnel that are needed. Without this sensitivity and thoughtfulness, this resource will not be fully utilized, even if it is readily available. The Virgin Islands is a very diverse community, and we must be committed to serving those who live and visit this special place.

In conclusion, I support this Bill and its intended purpose. I applaud Senator Capehart for sponsoring it, and I hope that the resources and personnel will be made available so we can create a more healthy, safe and caring Virgin Islands. I stand ready to answer your questions and to support the implementation of this initiative in whatever way I can at the University of the Virgin Islands.