



Government of
The Virgin Islands of the United States



VIRGIN ISLANDS POLICE DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE POLICE COMMISSIONER

RAY A. MARTINEZ
Police Commissioner

February 7, 2024

Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca
Chairperson, Committee on Health, Hospitals, & Human Services
35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Capitol Building
St. Thomas, VI 00804

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Re: Invitation to Provide Testimony Bill No. 35-0224 – Behavioral Health Services, Psychiatric Emergency Response Team (PERT)

Dear Senator Fonseca:

Thank you for providing the Virgin Islands Police Department the opportunity to offer testimony on Bill No. 35-0224, an Act amending Title 19, part V, Chapter 45, subchapter VI 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. Sponsored by Senator Diane Capehart. While my Team and I are unavailable today for in-person testimony we are in support of any legislation that supports behavioral health services and first responder response.

VIPD has held extensive discussions with Senator Capehart regarding this legislation, the Virgin Islands Department of Health the Executive Branch agency leading the crisis response charge, and the Judiciary. It is unfortunate, yet well established that law enforcement in particular has experienced limitations in its behavioral crisis response. The introduction of a Psychiatric Emergency Response Team in conjunction with a 988 system is a necessary and stimulating opportunity to reimagine how we as a Territory can respond to those in crisis. VIPD strongly believes a balanced response much of which is included in the bill would augment the system.

It is understood VIPD by default, will continue to be the primary responding agency until such time DOH develops a robust team. To that end, at the Academy level, we will continue to provide basic training in de-escalation and how to identify people experiencing a mental health crisis. Additionally, annual recurrent training will be required of all law enforcement officers. Discussions determining required initial and recurrent training hours will be had between DOH, POST, VI FEMS, and VIPD. Partnerships between our agencies will be a great opportunity for cross-systems collaborations to provide training and technical assistance. We will also have to re-visit communication policies to ensure they are in concert with 988 requirements. Of greatest importance is the need for clearly defined requirements when law enforcement officers will be deployed and how and when, the mobile crisis teams can employ the assistance of law enforcement.

The US Department of Justice recommends all first responder agencies review their policies, procedures, and training materials to ensure that 988 is effectively incorporated into the community's continuum of crisis responses. Questions to consider include: What steps need to be taken to ensure calls can be seamlessly transferred between 988 and 911? How can other first responders use 988 when encountering a person in crisis? Further, how do first responders respond in a manner that is culturally, linguistically and

developmentally appropriate? Lastly, how do we as first responders provide trauma-informed care during crisis? Implementing appropriate and updated policies and procedures will play a vital role in first responder success.

My Team and I will make ourselves available for your future scheduled discussions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ray A. Martinez', with a stylized flourish at the end.

RAY A. MARTINEZ
Police Commissioner