

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE OF RULES AND JUDICIARY**  
**35th LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS**

**TESTIMONY OF DR VINCENTIA PAUL-CONSTANTIN**

**In Support of Bill No. 35-0128, An Act amending title 27 Virgin Islands Code,  
chapter 4A relating to the practice of professional counseling to modify and update  
licensure requirements, and for other related purposes**

**DATE SUBMITTED: March 1, 2024**

**COMMITTEE HEARING DATE: March 6, 2024**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Good afternoon, Honorable Ray Fonseca, Chairperson of the Committee on Health, Hospitals & Human Services of the 35th Legislature of the US Virgin Islands. Good Afternoon Honorable Marvin A, Blyden, Sponsor of Bill No. 35-0128. Good Afternoon to other members of the committee, other senators present and those in attendance, including those who are viewing via media. I am Dr Vincentia Paul-Constantin, Chair of the Virgin Islands Board of Licensed Counselors and Examiners, a Licensed Professional Counselor, Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Qualified Supervisor and a Nationally Board-Certified Counselor. I am also the Founder and Executive Director of Beautiful Dreamers Behavioral and Educational Center, and Director of Social and Cultural Competence for the American Association of Forensic Professionals. I am honored to appear before you today in support of Bill No. 34-0190, An Act amending title 27 of the Virgin Islands Code, chapter 4A relating to the practice of professional counseling to modify and update licensure requirements, and for other related purposes.

## **PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND**

I am the daughter of immigrants hailing from Guyana and St. Lucia. I lived in a single parent home, and I am the product of public education on St. Croix. I attended the Arthur A. Richards Junior High and Central High Schools. I subsequently enrolled at the University of the Virgin Islands St. Croix Campus, and a year later transferred to the St. Thomas campus. Due to my area of study, I participated in an exchange program sponsored by the UVI and was admitted to the State University College at Buffalo in Buffalo – New York. It was at this university, due to my superior academic standing, I was granted permission to enroll in a master's program in Student Personnel Administration and Mental Health Counseling while still completing my bachelor studies in psychology. I graduated from State University College at Buffalo in May of

2001 with the relevant master's degree, and returned home to St. Thomas in June of 2001 to graduate with my bachelor's degree.

Upon returning to the mainland, I enrolled at the University of Georgia where I furthered my education, and in 2003 attained a master's degree in special education with a concentration in Autism. In 2005, I enrolled at Walden University where I received a specialization in Educational Leadership with a concentration in special Education. I continued on at this university and obtained a PhD in Education Leadership.

After serving 13 years as a Special Educator, a Special Education Coordinator, a Behavioral Specialist and Consultant in curriculum support for students with mental/behavioral health challenges and those with special needs in the Gwinnett, Marietta, and Fulton counties of Georgia, I returned to Walden University and completed a master's in counseling with a specialization in Crisis and Trauma. My education, my experience and my expertise have prepared me well to work in varying departments, agencies and organizations. As Director of Social and Cultural Competence for the American Association of Forensic Professionals, it is my mission to ensure that marginalized populations, specifically that of brown persons are evaluated and represented with compassion, knowledge, experience, and expertise.

In response to the growing national need for mental/behavioral health services for students and their families, in 2015, I founded and have directed Beautiful Dreamers Behavioral and Educational Center in Georgia. Beautiful Dreamers, as it is more readily known, is a nonprofit organization, concerned with the allocation of appropriate educational and mental health services for children and their families to include psychological, social, physical, emotional, developmental, and cognitive impairments. Beautiful Dreamers is also concerned with the adequate training/qualification of all school personnel who provide specialized services

to students. Such individuals include school administrators, school counselors, special educators, attendance monitors, paraprofessionals, parents and all stakeholders. Beautiful Dreamers believes and participates in collaborative efforts between government departments to ensure that students needing additional services outside of the school environment are afforded the opportunity.

While my work with Beautiful Dreamers has proven to be most arduous and painstakingly difficult, after my children, it is the most rewarding and fulfilling vocation. Under the umbrella of Beautiful Dreamers, I have worked in Haiti following the horrific earthquake of 2016. I was chosen to travel with an esteemed group of doctors who provided medical assistance while I supported the mental health of over 500 Haitians. This life changing experience in Haiti influenced my decision to provide behavioral health services to at-risk, economically disadvantaged communities.

In 2017, the devastating hurricanes of Irma and Maria on my island home of the US Virgin Islands further solidified my commitment when I won the Crisis Counseling contract to support the communities of St. Thomas and St. John. With the employment of 25 crisis counselors, two lead counselors and an office administrator, Beautiful Dreamers provided counseling support to over 25,000 residents. This free service provided by The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) under the division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), supported the wellness of locals who had adverse reactions to the hurricanes and those who had preexisting mental health challenges prior to the hurricanes.

Despite our time and financed-bound efforts, I recognized that the trauma that our people were suffering would require ongoing intensive treatment methods. Meanwhile, SAMHSA, too,

saw the dire and extensive need for intensive services, and unhesitatingly allocated funding for Clinical Services. Under this grant, Beautiful Dreamers employed Licensed Clinicians to provide counseling services. Thanks to the assistance of Senators Blyden and Sarauw, an office space was provided where seventy-five members from the local community received services at no cost. The extreme demand, however, eventually proved the catalyst for Beautiful Dreamers to open its door as a nonprofit organization in August of 2018 on St Thomas, to provide specialized educational supports for children and their families and the Virgin Islands Community as a Multi-Specialty Behavioral Health Practice. Since then, we have provided services to government agencies, and public and private schools throughout the territory.

### **THE NEED FOR THE COUNSELING BOARD AMENDMENTS**

In 2019, I was nominated and unanimously appointed as the first Chairwoman of the Virgin Islands Board of Licensed Counselors and Examiners. Since our inception, we have formed partnerships with the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC), Center for Credentialing and Education, CCE, Licensed Professional Counselor Association of Georgia, and American Mental Health Counselors Association. The Board has awarded approximately 40 licenses in the areas of Licensed Professional Counselor, Licensed Family and Marriage Counselor and Licensed Substance Abuse Counselor. Of these candidates, only ONE is local to the Territory. This individual attended the University of the Virgin Islands by completing curriculum gymnastics of taking courses from several disciplines, received supervision local and from the mainland via online platform, and being mentored and supervised by a Licensed Professional counselor every step of the way. It is greatly perplexing that candidates from the mainland, with no ancestral/familial/historical ties to the Virgin Islands, can be licensed to meet

the needs of Virgin Islanders while WE, local Virgin Islanders, with the talent, passion, education, commitment and desire to help our own people, and make a positive difference in our own communities have not been allowed the opportunity for licensure to help do the much needed work. Additionally, it is imperative that we consider the limitations of cultural competence when mainlanders can come into the VI to provide services without a clear understanding of our unique needs, cultural nuances and our distinct ethnic and racial presentations in which we, Virgin Islanders, are innate experts.

The areas highlighted in the proposed amendments will expand the existing code. The proposed amendments provide for a more robust understanding of the profession and scope of practice, establishing educational and experiential criteria that is commensurate with national standards and forging a clearer path towards licensure through the formation of associate professional license categories which will allow for local Virgin Islanders the opportunity to be educated, trained, supervised, and licensed in the Virgin Islands without leaving for the US mainland.

In 1956, Dr Elvin Semrad, an American Psychiatrist, who dedicated his life to the impact of trauma as a collective or individualistic phenomenon, noted that “The Greatest Sources of Our Sufferings are the lies we tell ourselves.” While the landscape of our world has changed since the 1950’s, we can all admit that we are in the middle of a mental health pandemic. As the entrusted leaders of the Territory of the United States Virgin Islands, lying to ourselves is to believe that we have enough providers to meet the needs of this community; lying to ourselves is to believe that our children are not being abused; lying to ourselves is to believe that we do not have gun or gang related violence issues; lying to ourselves is to believe that we are not subjected to human trafficking. Lying to ourselves is to believe that licensing those who hail from the mainland are

more qualified to meet the needs of our community than the people from the Islands of St. Croix, ST. Thomas and St. John. Lying to ourselves is to believe that we, collectively, have done enough to meet the emotional and mental needs of the locals. Lying to ourselves will only continue to fuel the source of our suffering in these US Virgin Islands. However, today, we believe that your vote in the affirmative to these proposed amendments will continue to ensure a unified front in meeting the mental health needs of our community, and to allow for CHOICE for individuals who are seeking services. Together we can achieve another significant milestone in favor of OUR community.

Thank you for your time and attention.