

Access to Racial and Cultural Health Institute, Inc.

“Linking Communities to Resources for Health Equity”



Testimony of Access to Racial & Cultural Health Institute in support of Bill No 35-0289, An Act amending title 27 of the Virgin Islands Code by raising the legal age to purchase tobacco products from 18 to 21 years of age. Duane Howell, Executive Director, Micah Crawford, Chair Youth Health Equity Project, Alilia Hantz, Chair, Youth Coalition, Drug Free Coalition of Adolescents and Young Adults (CAYA)

Good Morning Honorable Senator Fonseca and members of the Committee on Health, Hospital and Human Services. My name is Duane Howell, I am the Executive Director of Access to Racial and Cultural Health Institute, Inc., or ARCH Institute a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization operating in it's 21st year. Our office is based on St. Croix, but we serve and work with adolescents across the territory on emerging health threats. Joining me to testify are Alilia Hantz, Chair of our Youth Coalition and Micah Crawford, Chair of our Youth Health Equity

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Project. Both Alilia and Micah will offer brief testimony in support of Bill No. 35-Bill No. 35-0289- An Act amending title 27 of the Virgin Islands Code by raising the legal age to purchase tobacco products from 18 to 21 years of age.

Not only as a Registered Respiratory Therapist and the only Certified Asthma Educator in the territory, but as a public health professional, I applaud and show support for Bill No. 35-0289. The bill is critical for several reasons, one, it aligns the VI Code with federal law Tobacco 21, two, it demonstrates the territories commitment to reduce onset of tobacco use among adolescents and three it further safeguards adolescents and younger children from purchasing tobacco products in our retail stores, particularly blend or funta, the raw tobacco leaf commonly smoke with cannabis.

Over the past 18 months, ARCH conducted merchant education to raise awareness of the Tobacco 21 law and it superseding the VI Code. We met with merchants, we provided education, we provide age calculators and signs indicating no tobacco sales to persons under 21. Despite this effort across the territory, retailers continue to fail compliance checks being conducted by the Federal Drug Administration across the territory. Over the past six months, 24 retailers were found in violation of Tobacco 21; 45% were St. Thomas retailers. The latest compliance check where retailers were found in violation was conducted on July 25, 2024. Many of the retailers indicated, the disconnect with VI Code and Tobacco 21 as a reason for selling to persons under 21. In theory and based on this logic, Bill 35-0289 should hopefully reduce or outright eliminate such confusion.

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Just this past Monday, September 30, 2024. FDA new carding rules went into effect. All tobacco retailers are no required to perform an ID check on persons under the age of 30, you may be aware this use to be age 27. Additionally, the new rules also changes the restrictions to tobacco vending machines. Let me also note these rules also include tobacco products delivered through a vaping device or hookah.

Over the last several years, ARCH Institute has been raising awareness about funta. Culturally, there is significant perception of risk for cigarettes and if we examine tobacco use across multiple surveys, we will notice use is relatively low. Last year, I made a decision to substitute the word “tobacco” with “funta” on our Core Measures Survey and received approval from ONDCP evaluators for this change as it was specifically for our Drug Free Communities grant. Preliminary data, as expected showed an increase in tobacco use. I will argue there wasn’t an increase, but rather there was a language barrier for some time. Department of Health’s Tobacco Control Program is also diligent about language and increasing awareness of funta.

I think it is more important to hear from Alilia and Micah, so at this I would like to pass it on for the committee to receive their testimony. I stand ready to engage with the committee on the work we are doing to increase protective factors to decrease use of tobacco and other drugs in our underage population in particular.

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Micah Crawford's Testimony

Good Morning Honorable Senator Fonseca, committee members, fellow testifiers and the general public here in the chambers, listening and watching the hearing. My name is Micah Anijah Crawford. Thank you for the invitation to testify in support of Bill 35-0289, An Act amending title 27 of the Virgin Islands Code by raising the legal age to purchase tobacco products from 18 to 21 years of age. I am an alumnus of the illustrious Charlotte Amalie High School, holding the title of President of the Charlotte Amalie High School Class of 2024. I am now freshman at the University of the Virgin Islands, majoring in political science with the intent to minor in public administration. I currently hold the title of Freshman Senator of the Student Government Association. I am the Chairman of the Coalition for Adolescents and Young Adults' Health Champions Project under Access to Racial & Cultural Health (ARCH) Institute, Inc. In the past, I've also held positions such as President of the Amalian Student Council, President of the Amalian Chapter of the Junior Statesmen of America, Section Leader of the Cello Section at the Rising Stars Youth Steel Orchestra, and the list continues. I provide a snippet of my community involvement to provide the committee with context as to these roles allowing me to become a trusted community navigator.

ARCH Institute, very big on building our capacity to conduct community prevention work afford me the opportunity to realize my roles in these various organization were much bigger than the titles I held. As a peer educator and more so as a trusted community navigator,

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my community, teens, are comfortable to share, show and provide me with insights and other perspectives of the struggles of adolescents growing up here in the Virgin Islands. Amongst the many things they tell me, I am often made aware of the amount of vapes, e-cigarettes, or even cigarettes that my peers use nearly every day. When I refer to peers, I don't mean the people who are solely my age; I am referring to people who are three years younger or three years older. This means that 17, 16, and 15-year-olds are misusing vapes and e-cigarettes daily. This means 18, 19, and 20-year-olds are using vapes and e-cigarettes daily. As you may be aware, the brain fully develops around the age of 25 so early use will have an effect on the brain. Adolescents are intentionally eroding their brain simply because a lack of policy prevents them from doing so.

If we examine social determinants of health and the impact on increasing the risk for engagement in underage substance use, we will realize many youths live in substandard housing, live in poverty, academic achievement overall is average, and many do not receive regular medical check-ups. These are real factors this committee must also examine as you create new bills and laws and as you allocate funding for impactful and effective community prevention services rooted in population specific science.

ARCH Institute, over the last two years have made significant investment in my co-peer educators and I to increase our knowledge on what prevention is and how we plan and implement effective strategies. I've traveled to multiple CADCA forums and trainings as well as trainings planed by ARCH Institute. Through the various sessions, I've learned about effective prevention strategies to prevent and reduce drug misuse among adolescents. These strategies

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include giving information, providing support, capacity building, addressing barriers, changing consequences, addressing physical design, and—what I am doing now—policy changes. To effectively reduce the percentage of drug misuse in a community, you must utilize a combination of these strategies. It provides a multifaceted approach to tackling drug misuse in our drug-normalized society. Suppose the government is unwilling to contribute to our youth's educational infrastructure effectively. In that case, they should at least be willing to contribute to preventing drug abuse and other risky behaviors in our communities through this proposed amendment I am in support of, tangible funding allocations for effective prevention work, and supporting health prevention workforce development including youth peer leaders. Thank you for giving my community, adolescents and young adults a voice to be heard and for us collectively through my testimony to show support for Bill No. 35-2089.

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Alilia Hantz testimony

Good Morning, Honorable Senator Fonseca, committee members, fellow testifiers and the general public here in the chambers, listening and watching the hearing. My name is Alilia Hantz, a freshman student attending The St. Croix Educational Complex. I am President the Drug Free Coalition of Adolescents and Young Adults' (CAYA) Youth Coalition. CAYA is a program of Access to Racial and Cultural Health Institute, Inc. For short, we say ARCH or ARCH Institute. Our mission at ARCH is to increase the overall quality of life in the USVI and it starts with the youths . We generally target risky behaviors and focus on protective factors to preventing drug use among teens by sharing information about the effects of abusing drugs and encouraging positive behaviors among teens and their families.

I am also co-host of our newly teen talk show premiering in November along with Mykal Piper and Onile Edwards. I have been a member of ARCH for the last two years. ARCH provides my peers and I so much opportunities to learn about helping our peers reduce risky behaviors as well as to actually put into practice.

Last October, I had the opportunity to be the lead youth trainer at a three -day strategic prevention training with youths in South Africa. We guided them in effective planning on how we as youths can spread information about the negative use of tobacco. I was an eighth grader and my fellow youth trainers were in grade 12 and 10. These are the opportunities we are given at ARCH, to be leaders. We are supported and we are trained to do our job as peer educators. We

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are supported and encouraged to make decisions. So this is why I can sit here in front of you to testify. I am a part of other organizations, but none teaches us about the business we are involved in like how they do at ARCH.

Over the last several months, we have been studying the Strategic Prevention Framework, it is a method to deliver effective prevention programs by assessing, planning and evaluating our work. Over this time, I was able to complete many trainings to build my skills in strategic planning and identifying the root causes in my community.

We have also been studying the seven effective prevention strategies which includes also includes looking at policy. We learned about small p like a rule at school or a rule at home for example and big p, like laws. So honestly this is exciting I am once again being given the opportunity to practice the things we are learning. Big P policies, like Bill No 35-2089, An Act amending title 27 of the Virgin Islands Code by raising the legal age to purchase tobacco products from 18 to 21 years of age can have positive effects on reducing the onset of tobacco use among teens. This is because now they can't buy themselves and not too many of my friends hang out with 21-year-olds, maybe our cousins. But in general, no, so now with this law, it should make it more difficult to get access to tobacco products including blend and funta leaf. So this is why I am in support of Bill No. 35-0289. As a youth coalition, we target tobacco use because of the significant amount that is generally used in the youth population. More youths, ranging in ages from 12-17 generally use fonta and marijuana as an escape from their reality. Using tobacco can have a drastic effect on doing daily tasks such as getting through the school

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day. Considering that the brain isn't fully developed until 25 yrs. of age, using tobacco could interfere with comprehension skills which I often see occurring.

One question I would like to leave the committee with is what happens after the this bill passes. How will we provide information and encourage our retailers to consider the physical design of their stores by moving tobacco products from directly behind cashiers in so our youths don't have to easily see these products when they go to buy other items.

Thank you. On behalf of our Youth Coalition leadership, Jeniqua Weekes, Vice-Chair, Rey Belardo, Secretary, Makayla Maillard, Historian, Na'Kia Armstrong, Public Relations Officer, Edwin Collins and Onile Edwards, Finance co-chairs, Nasere Gibbs and Na'Kearah Armstrong, youth advisors, the leadership of ARCH, board of ARCH, thank you for allowing my peers and I to have a voice hear in the chambers of the Legislature of the Virgin Islands.

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