

**THIRTY-FIFTH LEGISLATURE OF THE U.S.
VIRGIN ISLANDS
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY,
JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY
Chairman: The Honorable Kenneth L. Gittens**

**Virgin Islands Police Department
St. Croix, USVI
December 11th, 2024**

Good morning to the Chair, The Honorable Kenneth L. Gittens, Legislative body and Staff, Members of the VIPD Team, and to the listening and viewing audience. My name is Sergeant Luis Ortiz, Supervisor of the Firearms division for the United States Virgin Islands Police Department. I come before you on behalf of Police Commissioner Nominee Mario M. Brooks to provide testimony on **Bill No 35-0419** - An Act amending title 23, Virgin Islands Code, chapter 5 by enacting the “Virgin Islands Firearm Serial Number Regulation Act.”

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Bill No. 35-0419, an essential piece of legislation that seeks to address a growing and urgent threat to public safety—the proliferation of un-serialized firearms, commonly referred to as "ghost guns."

The Federal Mandate for Serialized Firearms

Under federal law, specifically the Gun Control Act of 1968, all commercially manufactured firearms are required to bear a unique serial number engraved or

stamped on the firearm's frame or receiver. This mandate enables law enforcement agencies to trace firearms used in crimes back to their point of origin and often to their original purchaser. Serialized firearms play a crucial role in investigations, allowing authorities to identify trafficking patterns, recover stolen firearms, and hold offenders accountable.

The Threat Posed by Ghost Guns

Unlike traditional firearms, ghost guns are privately manufactured, often using kits or 3D printing technology, and lack serial numbers. This absence of serialization means these firearms are untraceable and fall outside the federal regulatory framework. They can be easily obtained without background checks, making them particularly attractive to individuals prohibited from owning firearms, such as felons and domestic abusers.

The growing availability of ghost gun kits online and their increasing use in criminal activities underscore the urgency of this issue. According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), law enforcement agencies recovered over 19,000 ghost guns in 2021—a tenfold increase since 2016. These firearms have been linked to violent crimes, including homicides and mass shootings, in communities across the United States.

The Impact on the Virgin Islands

In the Virgin Islands, where we are already grappling with significant levels of gun violence, ghost guns pose a severe risk to public safety. The inability to trace these weapons undermines law enforcement efforts to solve crimes and disrupt illegal

firearm trafficking networks. Moreover, the presence of untraceable firearms exacerbates the challenges of ensuring community safety and accountability.

The Importance of Prohibiting Un-Serialized Firearms

Bill No. 35-0419 is a necessary step in closing the loophole that allows ghost guns to evade regulation. By mandating serialization for all firearms, including those privately manufactured, this legislation will align the Virgin Islands with federal standards and enhance our ability to combat gun violence.

Banning un-serialized firearms sends a clear message that public safety is paramount and that every firearm in our community must be accounted for. It ensures that all firearms are subject to the same legal framework, helping to prevent their use in unlawful activities and promoting responsible gun ownership.

In closing, I urge the committee to advance Bill No. 35-0419 to protect our residents and strengthen our commitment to reducing gun violence. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I am available to answer any questions.