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**Testimony to:** The Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety

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**Introduction:**

Good afternoon to Senator Kenneth Gittens and members of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety, other members of the 34th Legislature, guest, and the listening public.

My name is Tony Emanuel, and I am the Executive Director of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention. I appreciate this opportunity to come before you and share our outreach approach progress, strategies, and initiatives.

**Mission:**

Our mission of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention is to help prevent gun violence and increase public safety by utilizing community-based outreach approaches. Our approach is rooted in a public health approach to violence prevention, recognizing that reducing crime is accomplished through collaborative efforts from local and federal government agencies, private businesses, non-profit organizations, faith-based organizations, and community members.

This public health approach to gun violence reduction does not replace, nor is it at odds with law enforcement, other government agencies, private businesses or other community organizations that engage in outreach activities aimed at reducing violence or providing resources for our community. Its focus is simply prevention by addressing the systemic root causes of gun violence.

**Gun Violence Reduction Approach:**

The following Gun Violence Reduction Approach Plan is separated into three sections: Violence Prevention; Violence Intervention; and Community Engagement. While Recommendations are made in each of the three categories, the primary focus of this plan is on Violence Prevention and Intervention. Violence Prevention refers to the elimination or reduction of the underlying causes and risk factors that lead to violence. Violence Prevention efforts are designed to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. Violence Intervention efforts, on the other hand, are designed to prevent the reoccurrence of violence or intervene and prevent the imminent act of violence. Both prevention and intervention hinge on deploying services that identify and address age and context-appropriate risk and protective factors. Violence Prevention efforts are most often targeted towards children and youth whereas Violence Intervention efforts tend to be focused on the people who are at the greatest immediate risk of violence, which according to data are typically young adults. While violence prevention is a broad field encompassing various types of programs, effective violence intervention is more defined and narrowly focused through community engagement.

Community Engagement refers to the elimination of factors that give rise to violence within a neighborhood, like poverty, blight, low performing schools, disinvestment, and chronic unemployment. While community transformation is a long-term strategy that can take 15-20 years to achieve, if successfully implemented, it can also be most effective at permanently reducing violence. In the meantime, we are focused on addressing our most pressing issues and prioritizing our outreach efforts.

**Violence Prevention:**

Our goal is to Implement a comprehensive, coordinated, territory wide Gun Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS). GVRS is a comprehensive strategy that utilizes a data-driven process to identify the individuals and groups at the highest risk of committing or being involved in gun violence and deploying effective interventions with these individuals to include more in-depth and intensive services and wraparound support. GVRS has four core components: 1) Data-driven identification of those individuals and groups at highest risk of gun violence; 2) Direct and respectful communication to those at considerable risk; 3) Intensive services, wraparound support, and exposure to opportunities; and 4) Focused enforcement, which entails sharing useful intelligence with local and federal Law enforcement agencies to help guide increased enforcement on serious crime and violence.

It is important to note that The Office of Gun Violence is not a law enforcement arm, or organization. We do not investigate shootings, arrest suspects or confiscate weapons, for the fourth component (Focused Enforcement) we rely heavily on our local and federal law enforcement partners for the criminal enforcement piece of the comprehensive strategy.

**Violence Intervention:**

Most gun violence is tightly concentrated on a small number of very high-risk young adults that share a common set of risk factors, including involvement in street crews, significant criminal justice history, often prior victimization, and a connection to a recent shooting (within the past 12 months). While the vast majority of people involved in shootings, as victim or suspect, are members or associates of street groups/gangs, the motive for the shooting may not be typical of a traditional gang war. Often shootings are precipitated by a petty conflict, misunderstanding, a simple argument, relationship issues or the now ubiquitous social media slight. The social media slight sometimes becomes a social media incited shooting. This is caused by postings and or videos that promote certain neighborhoods or cliques that also “dis” other crews or individuals, sparking a series of comments and competing videos that exacerbate existing beefs that can escalate into shootings. When shootings do occur the Office of Gun Violence Prevention team responds and offer support where needed.

**Community Engagement:**

It is not a coincidence that most of the gun violence in the Territory occurs in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty, blight, and schools with distracting issues. High crime neighborhoods are often those with dilapidated properties, empty lots, potholes, crumbling infrastructure, broken streetlights, abandoned vehicles, overgrown bush and trees, and other environmental factors that communicate to residents that the government does not care about them. Combined with poverty, perception of substandard education, and lack of opportunities, these neighborhoods become havens for violence. Despite these enormous challenges, the majority of the residents of these communities are law-abiding citizens trying to survive and only a small fraction are the ones involved in gun violence.

**Advisory Council and Staff:**

These approaches cannot be successful without the collaborative effort of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention Advisory Council. The Advisory Council consists of the collection of local and federal law enforcement, government agencies, local businesses, non-profit organizations, and faith-based groups that provide support and resources for this outreach approach.

The Office of Gun Violence Prevention Team consist of three main positions on each island: The Survivor Engagement Specialist, The Violence Interrupter, and the Community Engagement Coordinator.

Currently we have a Community Engagement Coordinator on St. Thomas and a Violence Interrupter on St. Croix. There are candidates in the system to be hired for the other positions.

**Survivor Engagement Specialist:**

The Survivor Engagement Specialist will be engaged with community residents to assist those in need and work at connecting at-risk community members with appropriate wraparound support resources.

When safe to do so, The Survivor Engagement Specialist (SES) will be expected to respond to crime scenes and interact with victims and survivors. They will coordinate response with VIPD, and other victims’ advocates or organizations. The SES will be responsible for engaging with victims and their families in the aftermath of life-threatening intentional trauma to help them address the short-term consequences of violence.

• Maintaining long-term connection with victims and their families to help them heal from the lasting consequences of violence.

• Connecting victims and their families with government and community-based services, including crisis intervention, case management, trauma-informed mental health services, and other support services.

It will be critical to create affirmative community-led communication of support and sympathy to recent victims of violence and their families, designed as an immediate response to a homicide or non-fatal shooting to interrupt disputes and prevent retaliatory shootings.

**Violence Interrupter:**

Violence interrupters (VIs) are designated to engage high risk individuals in efforts to reduce the potential for new or continued conflict and uses community partners to build coalitions and develop strategies to reduce violence. Violence Interrupters (VIs) are hired for their credibility, relationships, and influence within targeted neighborhoods and are trained to resolve conflicts. Violence Interrupters engage with the community to learn about brewing conflicts and resolve them peaceably before they erupt in violence. If a shooting does occur, the VI works with those affected by the incident to prevent retaliation.

The VI will plan for first direct communication with groups. Gun Violence Intervention is rooted in direct communication with active groups delivered by a partnership of law enforcement, social service providers, and community members. Traditionally, research recommends that agencies engage in courageous conversations (traditional or modified) approximately every four months during the first years of implementation to reach those at the highest risk and send the message about group enforcement, community concern, and available resources. Custom notifications and other forms of direct messaging are a constant throughout the year and should be used to interrupt “beefs,” prevent retaliation after a violent incident, calm outbreaks of group violence, and reinforce the core Group Violence Intervention message.

**Community Engagement Coordinator:**

The Community Engagement Coordinator (CEC) will be responsible for creating and implementing outreach activities, events, presentations, and trainings while continuing to engage other partners. Whether through regular shooting reviews, routine group audits, strategic enforcement action, custom notifications, and/or call-ins. The CEC will coordinate events with other community partners and be supportive of other initiatives aimed at reducing violence in the communities while encouraging comprehensive and committed partnership to ensure access to accurate intelligence and effective enforcement.

The CEC will adopt a whole of government response that facilitates a place-based and person-based strategy offering access to services within agencies/organizations responsible for education, job placement and training, housing, mental health and human services in a streamlined way and also partner with local philanthropy to expedite critical funding to community-based organizations and to make the funding process more efficient.

**Progress:**

The Strength of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention is without exception its current staff. Bruce Flamon the Community Outreach Coordinator and Damian Lang our Violence Interrupter have been doing the heavy lifting. They both hit the ground running bringing their non-profit organization outreach experience to the team and continuing great work and pushing innovative ideas to dissuade violence and offer alternative activities to promote peace and unity within the territory.

The Governor’s strong support of the office and having created the Advisory Council brings government agencies to the table in an effort to breakdown our silos and collaborate effectively on issues that plague our community. The energy of the Advisory Council is that of hope and cooperation. Makes me very excited about the possibilities for successful outreach initiatives and strategies.

We are receiving very positive feedback from the community we are serving. People have been contacting the office offering suggestions and thanking us for doing what we do. Other organizations are requesting our participation and support in events and programs that are geared for anti-violence.

Since the office has been up and running since March of 2022 we have seen a reduction in homicides in the territory in 2022 compared to 2023 and are hoping to continue the trend. This of course isn’t done alone. With the outstanding efforts from the Virgin Islands Police Department showing high visibility and rapid response to incidents has been very effective. Support from other agencies like the Health Department, Human Services and collaborating with the Department of Education with initiatives and programs are giving us hope that we are making a difference.

My staff and I are about the work, not the credit for when something goes well. What we have not been doing well is “*Public Promotion*”, meaning we are not very good at tooting or own horn and consequently many people still aren’t aware of what exactly our office does or what we are responsible for or what we have been doing. My staff and I have been featured on radio and TV talk shows and those opportunities are greatly appreciated. We will get better and get in the practice of using our Governor’s Office internal Public Information Office who have been assisting us as best they can. In fact to get the word out as well as provide a platform for young people to share their views we have our own radio show called “Level Up” on Radio One Am 1000 in an effort to present the community information of activities, entrepreneurship, as well as other partners in the community to share information. The show will be broadcast territory wide and utilizing live steaming on all social media platforms.

We have been fortunate that most of our outreach approaches have been funded with donations and help from other government agencies by waving fees and assisting us with use of space and or equipment as well as private community partners. Not only do we sponsor our own programs but we also assist non-profit organizations that are doing programs that clearly help our community or enrich our youth. Often times finding funding support for some of the outreach activities and programs or assisting other agencies and non-profit organizations can be a challenge. That’s where we have had to be creative. Amazingly, after having hosted several events, we have barely used government funds. We relied on the generosity of individuals, businesses, and other organizations to assist on making our events successful. Here again that is another reason the Advisory Council is so important, however if success is to be maintained we will need more support and funding to continue to provide this level of wrap around services. Everything cost at some level. Of course, “*Funding*” is going to rear its evil head. Trying to recruit and retain the best talent with attractive compensation is always going to be a hurdle. Luckily, we have folks that are dedicated to the mission and are in this for intrinsic reasons.

With the support of our Advisory Council partners, our community and YOU the legislature opportunities are boundless. The possibility of changing mindsets and teaching young and older people how to communicate with each other effectively and mange disputes without violence is an incredible opportunity. To give our young people hope and change their way of thinking that their lives are less than valuable and that they have a shorter life expectancy. We have the opportunity to make them feel loved and valued. Programs like the Greatest Show on Earth, Daddy’s Day Out and the Youth Talent Showcase give them praise and feeling of self-worth.

Working with other local and federal government agencies gives the opportunity for us to access resources and support mechanisms for our residents as well as outreach and law enforcement support for safer communities.

Through education and training programs we have opportunities to help make our residents employable, teach them sustainable life skills that can improve their own quality of life. This also includes connecting those citizens that feel disenfranchised or desperate for help or support with appropriate resources.

Over the past several months since the school year began, we have talked to over 2000 students in large and small groups from just about every high school in the territory, and some of the middle schools, and now we are reaching out to the elementary schools as well.

We have the opportunity to reduce tensions between “waring” groups and prevent needless violence and bloodshed. Create a community poised for mutual respect and caring for one another. Our Violence Interrupter has been able to quell several disputes within our communities and literally saved lives. This was the first Christmas Festival in over a decade where we didn’t have a serious gun violence incident.

Unfortunately, sometimes despite all efforts of preventing violence someone comes out of nowhere and violates the law or initiates community violence. It’s almost guaranteed one violent encounter will spark some retaliation. We just pray we catch it before people react poorly.

**Initiatives and Programs:**

The initiatives and outreach programs listed are either in progress, scheduled or planned to occur soon.

1. **Community Resource list (ongoing)**

When the Office of Gun Violence Prevention (OGVP) opened I tried to see who was doing what in the territory. I was overwhelmed at the number of agencies and organizations that are providing services to the community. I was just as impressed with the amazing work that so many folks are out there doing. Unfortunately, I also discovered that too many people do not know about the services, and many of the organizations are struggling to continue to be able to provide those services.

This initiative is to create an accurate list of resources to make available to residents and organizations to supplement support. The development of the list is a way to connect at-risk individuals with agencies or resources to assist them with immediate needs and hopefully assist them in being successful. The St. Croix Foundation was an incredible resource and has assisted with this project.

This information helps the Office of Gun Violence Prevention identify non-profit organizations that are providing similar services and assists those organizations in identifying clients or funding opportunities.

1. **Create Hope (on going)**

This program is an outreach effort in partnership with the Department of Education. I have spoken to young people that are of the belief they cannot change from their situations. Many young people do not believe they will live past the age of twenty-five years old. These individuals have lost hope.

Staff of the OGVP with assistance from faith-based groups as well as other community members go into the schools and give presentations on transformative life experiences.

Members of our community that lived in horrible situations, conditions and even lived a criminal life share how they endured and overcame obstacles.

1. **Back to Basics of Citizenship (on going)**

Over the years each generation seems to be getting further and further away from basic morals, manners, and the ability to make informed decisions.

This is an educational outreach program in partnership with the Department of Education, Fraternities and Sororities, and other community members where OGVP staff assisted by other agency professionals will provide curriculum-based presentations to young adults in the schools that will focus on Leadership, Anti-Bullying, Peer Pressure, Conflict Resolution, and Self Esteem. The OVGP will also coordinate mentoring programs as well.

1. **Save Someone You Love (Planning Stages)**

This initiative is focused on stopping the bleeding. Reviews of the most recent incidents indicate that citizens are putting gunshot wound victims in a personal vehicle and transporting them to the hospital. Unfortunately, during or prior to the ride the victim did not receive any life saving measures and bleeds out, consequently dying enroute, or shortly after arrival. Those that are not being transported at all typically loose too much blood before medical attention arrives and die on the scene. This outreach initiative in partnership with private businesses, Heath Department and Fire and Rescue includes four steps.

1. Offer Train the Trainer course on “Combat Medic Procedures”. This training will teach instructors how to teach realistic first responder training to handle serious trauma and stabilize life threatening injuries.
2. Train interested residents, shop owners, community center operators, housing community employees in and around the areas that according to data seem most affected by shooting incidents how to manage emergency trauma injury.
3. Place affective Trauma Kits in these areas that are accessible to the public.
4. Periodically check the kits to ensure they have all the equipment.

The goal being that if we teach community members how to administer first aid and stop the bleeding, this may result in lives being saved by simply taking simple steps to prevent blood loss.

1. **Get Them Working (on going)**

Many residents feel desperate and disenfranchised because of lack of employment or ability to afford simple necessities.

This outreach program in partnership with Human Services, Corrections, Re-Entry organizations, The University of the Virgin Islands and the Department of Labor and personnel is centered on assisting individuals in obtaining gainful employment, through the work force or entrepreneurship. The OGVP Victims Engagement Specialist will also connect at-risk individuals with social services support, skill training, counseling, and educational programs.

1. **Wellness in the V.I.**

Often times residents are not connected with the appropriate services that can assist them. This outreach program which is created by Housing Authority is done in partnership with our office, the Justice Department, the Virgin Islands Police Department, Human Services, and the Health Department.

The Office of Gun Violence participates in the Wellness Group that sponsors Wellness Days in the different housing communities. At these events’ government agencies, non-profit, faith-based groups and any other community members are invited to share a day where activities are scheduled encouraging residents to interact with organizations and agencies that may provide needed resources to assist them. We have done several over the past few months.

1. **Bags Across America (November)**

Bags Across America is a national program focused on assisting organizations that support victims of domestic violence. The OGVP did this outreach event in November in partnership with The Women’s Coalition of St. Croix, local sororities and fraternities and Peace Officer Standards and Training (P.O.S.T.)

This program encourages the donation of gently used purses or handbags and “comfort items” to be donated to the Women’s Coalition. Those bags are then used to provide comfort to victims of domestic violence while they are at the shelter or being placed.

We ask people to donate their handbag or purse and fill the purse with creature comfort items. Donators fill the bags with items like chocolates or candies, perfumes and lotions, toiletries, books, etc. Those small gifts bring some degree of pleasure and comfort to a woman who may be surviving a very traumatic incident.

1. **National Night; Out STT, STJ, STX (September)**

National Night Out is a national program designed to engage the community by hosting an event that highlights organizations and businesses that provide service to the community. The OGVP works this project in partnership with the Law Enforcement Planning Commission, local law enforcement agencies, and local Fraternities. We participated in this event in September on each island. At this event there was a Peace March, followed by a short program of motivational speakers, music and free food and drinks provided.

1. **Walk and Talks (on going)**

This outreach effort is done in partnership with the OGVP, the Virgin Islands Police Department, Health Department and Human Services.

The OGVP staff, Police Officers Health Department and Human Services representatives take some time and walk and talk to residents in various areas to make an effort to engage community members through conversations.

Our Violence Interrupter, and Survivor Specialist along with selected individuals and support organizations will walk the “Turfs” and housing communities to create dialogue in hopes of identifying systemic issues and problem within the community as well as diffusing issues and brokering truces.

1. **Greatest Show on Earth (October)**

The Greatest Show on Earth is sponsored by the OGVP and working in partnership with the Antilles School, W.I.C.O., Property and Procurement and the St Thomas Taxi Association, private businesses and non-profit organizations. This event is created and organized by the Community Engagement Coordinator of the OGVP.

The Greatest Show on Earth fosters an opportunity for organizations to highlight their programs and services. There is a fee to attend the event and those proceeds will be used to donate to the non-profit organizations that participated in the event. Many of these organizations are struggling to be able to continue to provide services or run their programs.

1. **Daddy’s Day Out (October / Christmas)**

Daddy’s Day Out is an outreach event sponsored in partnership with the OGVP, Fathers in the Community, the Department of Agriculture, Parks and Recreation, Office of the Governor, the Virgin Islands Police Department, and private businesses. This event is scheduled quarterly and is created and organized by the Violence Interrupter of the OGVP. The goal is to provide a safe alcohol and violence free environment for one full day.

In this safe place at the Agricultural Fair Grounds families can bring their children for a day of food and activities that bring the community together. Although the focus is on fathers, mothers are very much welcomed.

The organizers provide, free food, drinks, and prizes for participation in events throughout the day.

1. **Group Violence Intervention University (November)**

The Group Violence Intervention University (GVI) held in November was sponsored by the Office of Gun Violence Prevention in partnership with the University of the Virgin Islands, UVI Cell, The National Network for Safer Communities (NNSC) and the Office of the Governor.

The Gun Violence University was a summit and training opportunity for senior government agency leadership and those individuals designated to be intricately involved in the delivery of the NNSC group violence intervention model.

The GVI was hosted on both islands for two days each and held at the University of the Virgin Islands.

1. **Community Outreach Violence Prevention Trainings (ongoing)**

The Office of Gun Violence Prevention goes out in the community and offers training, and presentations to arm community members with ways to reduce conflict and best practices for dealing with violent encounters as well as general personal safety tips. The Director, Staff and other professionals in the field offer classes or presentations on Workplace Violence Prevention, Conflict Resolution, Customer Service, and Active Shooter Response.

1. **Virgin Islands Star Search / Youth Talent Shows (November/March)**

The Star Search Talent Competition provided an activity that brought people together to promote, support and acknowledge the amazing talent we have on our island. It also provides an opportunity for the winner to move to a national talent competition venue. This event gives our young people focus and teaches goal-oriented behavior and an alternative to negative influences or behavior.

The Star Search Talent Competition is a collaborative effort of the office of Gun Violence Prevention, Department of Education, private businesses and non-profit organizations.

1. **Radio Show and Public Service Announcements (on going)**

To help promote publicly and inform residents of the mission and outreach programs and activities of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention. The office will host a weekly radio program. The program will cover a range of topics that promote positive ideas for self-improvement, Territory safety, and anti-violence. Our first show will broadcast March 15th 2023.

1. **Other Activities**

Survivors walks and vigils, with non-profit organizations

Survivors support meeting with Women’s Coalition

Domestic Violence Symposium with Women’s Coalition

“Put Down the Gun” Walk and Rally with VIPD, Health and non-profit organizations.

Safety presentations with Rotary Clubs, & Delta Sigma Theta

Christmas Children’s Parade

Car Show / Sound System Competition and Parade

Martin Luther King March Participation

Youth Empowerment Summit

**Summary**

The most essential work to address the root causes of crime and violence should focus on eliminating poverty, improving the quality of and access to education, well-paying jobs and improving basic quality of life issues. That essential long-term work can and should be bolstered by efforts to demonstrate re-investment in neighborhoods through “greening and cleaning,” which research has shown is correlated with reductions in gun violence.

The Office of Gun violence Prevention is working to be a part of the change that can create safer communities within the territory and restore hope and peace.

Ladies and gentlemen thank you for the opportunity to share with you the Governor’s Office of Gun Violence Prevention.