***Testifier Testimony***

***AuxComm - Bill 35-0175***

* **INTRODUCTORY WORDING**
  + **Good morning Honorable Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman of the Committee of Homeland Security, Justice and Safety,**
  + Committee Vice Chairman the Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, and then all other Senators in attendance. Additionally, any GVI Commissioner, Director, etc. in attendance also needs to be recognized…”
  + The first testifier, Fred Kleber, has the responsibility to identify and acknowledge ALL Senators present for the hearing as indicated below. T
  + he first testifier is also responsible for acknowledging any other GVI official who is present in the audience – such as a representative from Government House, a Commissioner, Director (or other GVI agency heads.)
* **Standard Salutations** – “Good morning: H O N O R A B L E
  + \_\_\_ Committee Chairman Gittens,
  + \_\_\_ Committee Vice Chairman Ray Fonseca
  + \_\_\_ Senate President Novelle Francis (STX)
  + \_\_\_ Senate Vice President Marvin Blyden (STT)
  + \_\_\_ Senator Carla Joseph (STT)
  + \_\_\_ Senator-At-Large Angel Bolques, Jr. (STT/STJ)
  + \_\_\_ Senator Diane Capehart (STX)
  + \_\_\_ Senator Samuel Carrion (STX)
  + \_\_\_ Senator Dwayne DeGraff (STT)
  + \_\_\_ Senator Alma Francis Heyliger (STT)
  + \_\_\_ Senator Donna Frett-Gregory (STT)
  + \_\_\_ Senator Javan James, Sr. (STX)
  + \_\_\_ Senator Marise James (STX)
  + \_\_\_ Senator Franklin Johnson (STX)

**\_\_\_ Assistant Director DeBlasio of VITEMA**

* …and greetings to all attendees, both physical and virtual.

**Testifier #1: FRED KLEBER - ARRL, USVI Section Manager**

***# Intro slide (1) – Title slide - AuxComm, Amateurs and The Territory***

Good morning Honorable Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman of the Committee of Homeland Security, Justice and Safety, Committee Vice Chairman the Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, and then all other Senators in attendance. My name is Fred Kleber and I reside in St. Croix. I come before you this morning on behalf of Virgin Islands amateur radio operators. As the name implies, we are non-sponsored individuals who use our personal equipment and skills for the benefit of the Territory. Commonly referred to as “hams”, we have a lengthy history of providing public service to the Virgin Islands governmental and public sectors for many decades. While the public might associate ham radio activities with public service communications, there is a non-public side ~~of~~ to this pastime which includes experimentation, education and advancement of the hobby. The service is licensed and regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, or FCC. As a condition of their license grants, hams are not allowed to engage in pecuniary interests.

Today you will hear from four testifiers with diverse entrance paths into ham radio. They will explain various elements of volunteering their communications skills and equipment to assist VITEMA and the community. During volunteer disaster operations, ham’s activities are sometimes subjected to potentially liable situations. The AuxComm Act of 2023 proposes to formally establish a VITEMA directed framework of auxiliary communicators, and reduce their liability, just as the Good Samaritan does act for volunteers rendering medical aid.

***# Change slide (2) – The Early Years***

Here’s my story of how I became interested in amateur radio and how it enriched my life. As a youngster delivering newspapers, I curiously inquired to a customer about the purpose of the tower in his yard. This led to obtaining my first license as a pre-teen and commenced a life-long passion of communications. Suddenly the world became a lot smaller. I still vividly recall my excitement when I connected with, or “worked” as we call it in the ham radio world, my first Japanese station. As a high-schooler I marveled at working a famous VI ham named Dick Spencely on Morse code. My association with this “hobby” led me to communicating with other prominent island hams such as Addie Ottley, Aubrey Nelthropp and John Ackley. Little did I know that their homeland would be my future home.

***# Change slide (3) – Public Service – My Calling***

My yearning for communications led me to obtain a higher education engineering degree, followed by a lengthy career in the telecommunications sector. My first major disaster experience was providing critical communications following the devastating 1985 earthquake in Mexico City. In this pre-internet era, we passed over 7,000 pieces of health and “welfare traffic”, or messages. My feeling of fulfillment in helping to connect loved ones with their kin in ~~a~~ far-away lands brought immense gratification. This feeling also cemented my desire to further serve the public through my telecommunications skills.

The Mexico experience fueled my continuing desire to volunteer during disasters and emergencies. This led me to volunteer with governmental agencies in Florida. Through many hurricane activations, I learned the importance of preparation, training, and command structure. For over two decades I have been a radio operator with the National Hurricane Center in Miami. Ham radio is an ideal tool to collect weather data from mariners and internet challenged island locations. These experiences prepared me well for my relocation to the Territory some 13 years ago.

***# Change slide (4) – American Radio Relay League***

With its global reach and apolitical basis, amateur radio services as one of the world’s largest informal fraternities. My association with the local island radio club led me to a decade of serving as its President. Ham radio is a very large community. It is not just a local or national body. If fact, ham radio has a global presence. Nationally, ham radio operators find common ground in a robust national organization called the American Radio Relay League, or ARRL. The ARRL is the national organization for amateur radio and boasts more than 160,000 members. Its pillars are those of public service, advocacy, education, technology and membership. Local ARRL representation is facilitated through Section Managers in each of the 71 geographic regions. I have served as the USVI Section Manager for a dozen years.

***# Change slide (5) – ARES Overview***

One of many functions under the ARRL umbrella is the Amateur Radio Emergency Service, or ARES. While organized nationally, ARES functions at the local level and is led by the Section Manager. ARES is similar to RACES, the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service. Years ago many knew these functions simply as “Civil Defense”. The VITEMA – VI-ARES relationship spans several decades. Current VI-ARES membership numbers around 35. Four core~~s~~ classes are required for membership. Following the conclusion of my testimony, the next testifier will elaborate on the training requirements for ARES membership and training exercises.

***# Change slide (6) – St. Croix VITEMA Comms Center***

If I may, I would like to delve a little deeper into my disaster and emergency experience here in the Territory. One day I received a phone call from the assistant of a newly appointed VITEMA Director. He wanted to meet with me regarding the continuance of ham support to VITEMA. VITEMA had just relocated to a new facility and he sought ~~the~~ assistance from hams to construct a new communications center. Soon a pile of discarded electronic equipment was transformed into a communications center in the emergency operations center, or EOC. This effort included programming radios, installing antennas, power supplies and feedlines.

***# Change slide (7) – Taking care of “business”…***

Next I found myself in EOCs on other islands programming radios to enable efficient intra-island and distant communications. Following this, the hams were requested to participate in periodic “communications checks” with FEMA, and other partner agencies, to validate equipment functionality, which enhanced operator competence. These changes and activities created the capability to communicate with other government agencies, universities, hotels, the refinery, hospitals, Red Cross, aircraft and, most importantly, pre-storm deployed FEMA radio systems. The renewed communications role of Territory hams brought them back to the table as embedded front-line EOC communicators.

***# Change slide (8) – Not IF, but WHEN…***

Hurricanes are part of life in the topics, however nothing could have prepared the Territory for the apocalyptic devastation from back-to-back hurricanes Irma and Maria. Suddenly, most of the previously practiced tabletop scenarios became real-life, along with many more situations which were not anticipated. Territorial hams rose to the cause and manned the communications centers at the St. John and St. Croix EOC.

***# Change slide (9) – Irma Arrives!***

Hurricane Irma caused significant damage to the islands of St. Thomas and St. John. A major telecom tower on Bordeaux Mountain succumbed to the 200+ mile per hour winds. One indicator of the intense wind strength was the bark being blown off of tree trunks on Bordeaux Mountain. One ham described the view in the valley below him as a “salad shooter”.

***# Change slide (10) – Injects That Never Happen?***

An “inject” is a situation that is inserted into a tabletop training exercise. Here’s an example of an unscripted real-life situation we encountered following the passage of Hurricane Maria. This unfortunate event happened to occur as were expecting the arrival of a med-evac helicopter to the St. John landing pad. Thankfully VIPD quickly eliminated the danger and the med-evac helicopter was able to evac the patient.

***# Change slide (11) – Maria Arrives***

Next St. Croix was battered by hurricane Maria. When it was over, we realized the worst-case scenario for the territory. All of the emergency training and disaster drills we practiced at all of the island EOCs did not compare to this new, compromised reality. Supporting these disasters would be the most challenging assignment ever undertaken by territory hams. ARES hams deployed and began shifts at the St. Croix EOC.

***# Change slide (12) - The Aftermath***

The USVI communications infrastructure was also heavily impacted by the storms. The trunked radio portion of the VI governmental system was largely non-functional, absent small pockets of connectivity. It soon became evident that ham radio was the only communications path to St. John. Messages from the St. John EOC were relayed to the St. Thomas EOC via the St. Croix EOC due to technical challenges. This was a true team effort.

This was no exercise. Time was critical to locate, triage, and treat the injured. Critical cases would be med-evac’d to shipborne medical facilities and others in Florida. The value of hams’ Incident Command System training was immediately evident as we attended daily briefings at the EOCs. You will hear more about the Incident Command System, or ICS from a subsequent testifier. The EOC briefings were attended by all supporting Territorial and Federal partners, governmental and private sector alike.

***# Change slide (13) – Irma-Maria Emcomm Hierarchy***

Following the storms, there were four main types of communications. First, and most important, was the establishment of communications between all VITEMA EOCs. This included communication from the VITEMA Director to other EOCs and Incident Commanders, as well as 911 emergencies passed to the appropriate call center. Since all radios at the STJ EOC were non-functional, a selfless ham on St. John who realized the urgency of the situation left his personal vehicle fitted with ham equipment, at the STJ EOC so that continuous communications activities could occur

The second was linking of VI governmental agency department heads together to exchange status and response messages. Examples included intra-island messages & live conferences for VIPD, VIFS, DOH, Waste Management, Attorney General, etc.

The third form of communications included providing logistical communications for shelter locations and other so-called NGOs, or non-government organizations. For example, the Red Cross, churches, hotels. Shelter counts and supply needs were common types of traffic handled.

***# Change slide (14) - US Navy Support – Air & Sea***

And the last form of communications, and most diverse link, was that between Territorial and Federal partners, including the US military and FEMA. Three large naval vessels supported the recovery effort. Hams established a twice daily HF (high frequency) network gatherings also known simply as “nets” for response agencies to disseminate open-source information. For example, curfew, weather, port conditions, airport ops, closings, etc. This net had from 5 to 20 check-ins, and even included some participation from Puerto Rico. Examples of participating agencies included: VITEMA EOCs, the VI National Guard, the Puerto Rico National Guard, FEMA, and the Department of Defense, and also including US Naval vessels.

***# Change slide (15) - Landing Zone Management – STJ***

The single helicopter landing pad at the Myrah Keating Smith Community Clinic (MKS) on St. John quickly was identified as a ‘choke point’ for responding helicopters. When the landing pad was occupied, no other helicopters were able to land. As this is an uncontrolled facility, pilots directly notify each other when taking off or landing. A mixture of civilian and military helicopters initially comprised arrivals. To monitor congestion, a clinic maintenance worker was enlisted to report the nature and type of arriving helicopters. This information was relayed to the St. Croix EOC via the sole surviving ham repeater on St. Croix.

Hams identified the congestion issue to Incident Commanders when helicopter bottleneck threatened to delay or prevent timely med-evac landings. Pre-storm helicopter arrivals would number 15 - 20 per day. The off-loading of military supplies would often tie up the landing pad for lengthy periods. Hams worked with their Federal partners to arrange additional off-loading resources at the clinic. One early challenge was that military helicopters had no equipment to operate on any FAA or civilian radio frequencies. The military solved this issue by soliciting sailors on the naval vessels for hand-held ham radios. You can imagine the hams’ surprise when military aircraft began showing up on the St. Croix ham repeater!

***# Change slide (16) - Tick Tock***

The emergence of medical evacuations, or med-evacs, added a critical new dimension to landing pad prioritization. For the first St. John med-evac, I vividly recall my satellite phone conversation with the Chief of the Puerto Rico Air National Guard. He stated, “Puerto Rico to St. John is a very long trip for a helicopter. I have 10 minutes of extra fuel on that chopper, and if the landing pad isn’t clear, I will turn him around and bring him back.” Suddenly landing pad congestion had become a potential life or death situation.

Sensing the dire nature of the situation, I proposed to the Incident Commander that hams could assume landing zone management at the Myrah Keating Community Health Clinic. The hams were granted this authority by the St. Croix Incident Commander and went to work. A prioritization landing plan was created to facilitate critical med-evacs. Helicopter deployment schedules were obtained from our Department of Defense partners. Landing zone arm signals were communicated to the hospital maintenance worker via radio. A plan was quickly implemented to prioritize med-evac arrivals.

***# Change slide (17) - Getting it Right – EVERY TIME!***

Another vital task was the accurate relaying of medical information for the departing med-evac patients. Most hams are not trained medical personnel, but train extensively in the relaying of accurate information using specific protocols. The absolute necessity of accurate information is illustrated by an experience I had for a priority med-evac. The ham sending the med-evac information was also trained EMT:

Him: “We have a 24 year old, female DKA who requires immediate med-evac”

Me: “Roger 24 year old female and immediate med-evac. Please confirm that is DKA, delta-kilo-alpha.”

Him: “Yes, that’s right, DKA”

Me: “Negative, please confirm DKA, delta [pause], kilo [pause], alpha”

Him: “Yes, diabetic keto acidosis”

Me: “Negative, please confirm phonetically D-delta, K-kilo, A-Alpha”

Him: “Roger, delta-kilo-alpha.

Me: “Confirming delta-kilo-alpha. Message copied and will relay”

As a non-medically trained professional, I had no idea what DKA signified, but I knew that message accuracy was critical. Without the use of standardized phonetics, the diagnosis might have been incorrectly recorded as DKJ, BKJ, BAK, EKJ, or EKA as they all sound alike. Even with the use of phonetics, the exchange took three iterations to ensure accuracy. In situations such as this, a person’s life may depend on message accuracy. Accuracy is paramount, always.

***# Change slide (18) – ARES Response Summary***

VITEMA support by ARES members spanned some five-weeks and totaled more than 2,300-man hours. VITEMA EOC connectivity was maintained throughout the entire activation. Open-source info was passed to responding agencies via an ARES managed net. Over this period, helicopter landings at Myrah Keating Clinic totaled some 125 to 150, with about 15% of these being priority medical evacuations. These contributions from hams are quantifiable and of benefit to the Territory. By accepted industry valuations, this activation alone saved the V.I. Government an estimated $90,000 in emergency operational costs.

***# Change slide (19) - National Recognition***

USVI ARES hams were recognized for their efforts with the awarding of the International Humanitarian Award by the ARRL.

***# Change slide (20) - Saving Lives***

Saving lives is the pinnacle of hams’ first response efforts. There is no better feeling than knowing you saved someone’s life. Those saved will go on to marry, have kids, and live their lives. Hams are not super-heroes. This is what we train and practice for. The FCC recognizes this public value through generous frequency use grants to hams.

***# Change slide (21) – The Risks***

ARES public service, however, does not come without risk. Many make the mistake of not addressing the issue of liability until it’s too late. What if med-evac aircraft did not arrive in time to save a life due to a missed, or incorrect, communication? What if a miscopied patient condition led to incorrect treatment, thereby causing a death?

While I was proud of the fact ARES members had contributed to saving many lives, I was immensely concerned about the potential liability ARES members were exposed to. The Good Samaritan act, and others, were created to mitigate risk, and ward off lawsuits against those who are “just trying to do the right thing and help their fellow mankind”. Yet, in today’s litigious society, even a hot cup of coffee can become the target of a lawsuit. It is for this reason I felt strongly that, given the nature of ARES activities, an AuxComm structure should be formalized, and risk mitigation be implemented.

Conversely, the lack of liability coverage similar to the Good Samaritan Act, could become an impediment to volunteering. People may weigh the consequences and prefer to avoid becoming vulnerable to a lawsuit by simply not volunteering their services. As we experienced during Irma and Maria, ham operators were a vital component in the disaster and recovery plans. The territory would have been further devastated without the essential services provided by these heroic ham operators.

***# Change slide (22) – AuxComm – What & Why?***

Now I wish to address AuxComm. AuxComm stands for “auxiliary communications” resources provided by ARES volunteers. It is a framework through which ARES volunteers work with VITEMA to identify, train, qualify and deploy volunteers. Currently, Territory amateur radio operators are subject to liability for acts and/or omissions incurred while providing emergency services to the Territory. They are prohibited from receiving compensation to allow them to mitigate these liabilities.

Why does the USVI need AuxComm? Amateur radio operators should be afforded the same liability protections as others responding to the Territorial Government in emergency situations. This legislation provides liability relief when amateur radio operators, previously vetted and approved in accordance with the AuxComm Act, perform in a non-negligent manner on behalf of VI Government agencies. This allows amateur radio operators to volunteer their services without accepting unacceptable levels of risk associated with providing emergency services. Without relief, amateur radio operators are hesitant to accept the risks inherent in providing services to the Territory. As the leader of ARES, I would be remiss to expose ARES volunteers to these risks.

What will AuxComm cost the government of the Virgin Islands? In a word, nothing. While there are provisions for reimbursement for travel and payment for meals, no compensation is to be paid to the volunteers. This saves GVI about $39.00 per hour per volunteer, per the 2023 US national average hourly wage for a radio frequency consultant. At no time will compensation be paid to amateur radio operators for their time, for their expertise or for the use of their equipment.

Why can’t this issue be addressed by policy and/or a memorandum of understanding between VITEMA and ARES?

Only laws can provide relief from the types of tort liabilities confronting ARES operators volunteer their services to the Territory. In addition, clearly defined legal authorizations for monetary reimbursement of expenses ensure transparency and consistency.

***# Change slide (23) – AuxComm Summary***

In summary ARES volunteers who donate their time are exposed to considerable risk. They are personally liable for any personal defense. Conditions of their licenses prohibit them from receiving any compensation. There is no Good Samaritan equivalent to protect ARES volunteers. This potential risk deters many ARES volunteers. As the ARES Territorial leader, this exposure of ARES members to this potential liability is not prudent. Absent travel and meals costs, there is no cost to the VI government. The aforementioned ARES volunteer experiences for the 2017 hurricanes were the trigger which precipitated the need for AuxComm.

Next, you will hear from 4 testifiers who will share various experiences and facts from a civilian, Territorial and Federal perspective. Thank you in advance for your support of Bill No. 35-0175, the AuxComm Act of 2023.

***# Change slide (24) – (Blank blue slide)***

***End of Testifier #1 testimony***

**Testifier #2: REYNOLD ST. LOUIS - Retired VI National Guard and Former Educator**

Good morning to all present. Protocol having been established, I would like to thank Committee Chairman Gittens for the opportunity to testify on this bill. My name is Reynold St. Louis and I reside on the island of St. Thomas. I come before you today to share my thoughts and experiences in both the private and military sectors of communications. In the late 1980s I was active on citizens band, or CB, radio, but hurricane Hugo flattened all the CB antennas in the Territory. Based on the lack of that communications mode, I made a decision to become a ham.

***# Change slide (25) - Tenets of First Response***

While the radio support end of things may seem glamorous at first glance, it’s paramount to be personally prepared in advance of any volunteer activities. Volunteers must be well prepared at home before they can leave their families following a disaster to serve. The number one rule of first response is not to become a victim yourself. It is counterproductive to volunteer to help others unless and until you are fully prepared, and can leave home to do so. The number two rule of volunteering is to ensure the safety of your family and home first, always. There are no exceptions to this rule.

As a former VI National Guard Communications Unit member, I understand the importance of communications. As a traffic handler in the Military Affiliate Radio Service, or MARS, I gained significant post-disaster communications experience. Following hurricane Hugo, my unit passed disaster status and health and welfare traffic to stateside MARS stations. This experience enlightened me as to the value of accurately passing message traffic.

***# Change slide (26) - ICS - The Common “Language”***

As many of you know, the military is known for protocol, and this same requirement exists for hams volunteering with served agencies. Many think hams are just a bunch of hobbyists talking on radios. Nothing could be further from the truth. When volunteering in emergency management environments, it is absolutely critical that hams understand the organizational structure and command protocols in which they will function. The nearly universal command and control structure for most US agencies, and many corporate and private response organizations, is called Incident Command System, or ICS. Since 2004, ICS has been a standardized approach to the command, control, and coordination of emergency responses, providing a common hierarchy within which responders from multiple agencies function. ICS was developed by, and is administered by, the Federal Department of Homeland Security.

***# Change slide (27) - Emergency Support Functions (ESFs)***

Within the ICS structure are so-called Emergency Support Functions, or ESFs. Here is a listing of the fifteen defined ESFs. The ESFs are scaled according to the type and magnitude of the disaster. This consistency ensures that volunteers coming from outside the Territory are more efficient because they are working in a familiar command and environment. The Communications ESF is that under which AuxComm volunteers are grouped.

***# Change slide (28) - Practice Makes Perfect***

Similar to the FCC licensing requirements of ham radio, there are ICS certifications in a variety of areas. There are hundreds of on-line ICS classes specializing in a wide variety of disaster scenarios. ARES and AuxComm volunteers are required to have passed a minimum of four core ICS classes. AuxComm leadership is required to have passed advanced ICS classes, some of which consist of one-week table-top exercises with other Virgin Island ESFs. This advanced training ensures that AuxComm volunteers understand the environment in which they will function in the emergency operations center, or EOC. Hams have been embedded first responders with VITEMA for several decades. In fact, an early agreement between VITEMA and the hams was signed in 1991 by Major General Charles Hood.

While hams are known for their traffic handling skills, their technical contribution should not be discounted. One differentiating skill that hams possess is the ability to troubleshoot and repair radio equipment, even during disasters. Examples of hams’ technical contributions are assisting FEMA and the Secret Service with establishing internal island communications, and assisting the US Coast Guard in locating an interfering marine channel 16 signal.

As I have outlined, territory hams are trained to be embedded front-line communicators, and contribute their technical skills to enhance VITEMA emergency communications. They understand what it means to be a part of a successful disaster recovery team.

Thank you for your time and I urge you to vote in favor for the AuxComm Act.

***# Change slide (29) – (Blank blue slide)***

***End of Testifier #2 testimony***

**Testifier #3: CELIA KALOUSEK - *VIVOAD, CEKA Ventures, SBDC***

***# Change slide (30) – VIVOAD, CEKA Ventures, SBDC***

Good morning to all present. Protocol having been established I would like to thank Committee Chairman Gittens for the opportunity to testify on this bill. My name is Celia Kalousek, and I've been a resident of St. John for over 21 years. I appear before you today as a witness to share insights, thoughts, and experiences from a nonprofit and small business perspective concerning the proposed AuxComm bill.

I have held a Ham radio operator license since the 2017 storms. I own a small business in downtown Cruz Bay, CEKA Ventures, a business consulting firm, and presently serve as the sole counselor for the Small Business Development Center on St. John; a position I assumed when I established the office in 2020. Additionally, I am an Executive Board member of VIVOAD, the Virgin Islands Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster.

***# Change slide (31) – Because Disasters Know No Boundaries***

My journey into Ham radio operation began during my seventh year as the Director of the St. John Community Foundation. In 2012, I assumed leadership of the St. John COAD under the auspices of VIVOAD. This decision stemmed from the realization that each island required a unique disaster response plan, as a one-size-fits-all approach was impractical. We quickly realized that the plans for St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John, and Water Island have to be a collaborative and coordinated effort with open and uninterrupted lines of communication.

***# Change slide (32) – National VOAD was established in 1970***

For those unfamiliar with VOAD, it was established over 50 years ago in response to the challenges many disaster organizations faced following Hurricane Camille, a category 5 storm that struck the Gulf Coast in 1969. Prior to that, numerous governmental, private sector, and nonprofit organizations independently served disaster survivors, not only leading to unnecessary duplication of efforts, but also resulting in unmet needs.

National VOAD emerged to address this inefficiency by serving as a knowledge-sharing forum and a resource coordination platform during the disaster cycle, from preparation to response and recovery. This commitment involves adherence to the guiding principles we call the "4C's": communication, coordination, collaboration, and cooperation.

***# Change slide (33) – All sectors of society must work together***

National VOAD is the primary point of contact for voluntary organization in the National Response Coordination Center (at FEMA headquarters), a signatory to the National Response Plan, and an Emergency Support Function partner of many other federal agencies as delineated in the National Disaster Recovery Framework.

***# Change slide (34) – Today, National VOAD is a coalition (logo page)***

Today, National VOAD is a coalition of over 50 of the nation’s most reputable national organizations (faith-based, community-based and other non-profit organizations) and 55 State/Territory VOADs.

***# Change slide (35) - The EOC & ICS***

As the VI VOAD lead for St. John, I was invited to participate in EOC pre and post-storm planning and exercises. Over the years, I completed ICS courses to understand communication protocol. I also attended numerous VITEMA Table Top Exercises and FEMA trainings. Serving as a licensed Ham and the VIVOAD lead for nonprofit support of the EOC under the Department of Human Services, my responsibility was to ensure a coordinated nonprofit response effort. Our focus was to coordinate valuable community resources to address identified service gaps during emergencies and disasters at the request of DHS. This coordination hinges on clear and uninterrupted communication both on island, between islands and with stateside partners.

One of the FEMA trainings highlighted one of many potential valuable services our Hams could provide. Before trained structural engineers and experts arrive to assess damage and make recommendations for resource allocation, they need an initial understanding of the extent of damage to private property. With proper training, Ham operators can provide these initial assessments and convey critical information in a timely manner. Naturally, we always consider the TENETS OF FIRST RESPONSE that Louie discussed earlier.

***# Change slide (36) – Then there was Irmaria***

Through my disaster response and recovery efforts, I've witnessed how Hams can complement our coordinated response when conventional communication channels fail. These examples represent only a fraction of how Hams provide invaluable assistance in disaster response and recovery efforts.

* After Irma, HAM and Sat phones were the only way to let Coral Bay know that Maria was coming.
* Having a Ham operator at Volunteer Reception Centers ensures that we deploy the right volunteers to the right places at the right time.
* Ham operators at shelter sites facilitate communication regarding supply needs, medical attention, security or other support.
* Ham operators at distribution sites help relay information about available supplies, their locations, and areas where they are needed.
* Local businesses have played a significant role in feeding efforts, and local Hams can help coordinate elements of this side of service provision efficiently.

***# Change slide (37) – Community Value***

Collaboration with Ham radio operators fosters community development through partnerships with organizations across the territory. The corresponding slide shows the roll call from one of the post-disaster monthly community meetings on St. John, showing Governmental agencies, nonprofits, churches, and more.

Hams are involved in key Territorial and Federal roles, as well as at grassroots levels. Many of these existing relationships promote deeper cooperation between Hams and local agencies, which is crucial during times of need. For example, we have working relationships with Hams in various positions, such as Directors of VITEMA and the Bureau of Information Technology, the National Park Service on STJ, the Commander of the US Coast Guard sector San Juan, the Regional Manager at the Transportation Service Agency, and even at the board level of FEMA. Notably, Hams were present on naval vessels providing support after the 2017 hurricanes.

***# Change slide (38) – Strength in Numbers***

The two primary drivers for entry into this hobby are public service and self-preservation. This was especially evident following the 2017 hurricanes, particularly on St. John. Personally, it has been more of a community service than a hobby for me.

As of the last count, there are 285 licensed Ham radio operators in the US Virgin Islands. Among them, 116 operators (41%) are in St. Croix, 107 operators (38%) are in St. Thomas/Water Island, and St. John boasts 62 Ham operators, with an intriguing note that 42% of the St. John Hams are female.

While I estimate that only 25-30% of these territorial Hams are actively engaged, due in part to some being part-time residents, they are situated in every area of the Territory, from Frederiksted to Fortuna and Cruz Bay. It's highly likely that you know a Ham or have one in your neighborhood. This distribution is a significant asset for reporting conditions during and after a disaster. For example, Hams were able to relay three situational reports from Water Island within the 12 hours following Irma.

Another benefit of collaborating with Hams is that there is no cost for the VI to supply Hams with equipment. Most Hams have their personal equipment at home, and many have it in their vehicles. Some Hams even possess equipment that surpasses government systems. Our territory-wide linked repeater system, which also offers internet linking, is entirely owned and maintained by volunteer Hams, meaning there is no cost to the VI Government.

***# Change slide (39) – In Summary***

In closing, I want to underscore the vital role that Ham radio operators play in disaster response and recovery efforts in the Virgin Islands. As both a licensed Ham operator, a small business owner, and a community service provider, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of their selfless service. The collaborative efforts between Ham operators and various agencies, nonprofits, small businesses,and government authorities, have been instrumental in creating a resilient and well-coordinated disaster response network.

Their ability to provide timely and accurate information, coordinate resources, and maintain communication when other avenues fail is invaluable. With a growing number of Ham operators across the territory, we have a significant asset for reporting conditions and providing supportive services before, during and after disasters.

What makes this collaboration even more remarkable is that it comes at no additional cost to the Virgin Islands Government. Hams bring their personal equipment, expertise, and a strong sense of community service to the table, ensuring that resources are efficiently utilized.

In these challenging times, fostering and furthering these partnerships with Ham radio operators is not just prudent; it's a necessity. I urge you to support the proposed AuxComm bill, which will formalize and enhance our collaboration with these dedicated individuals. Together, we can continue to build a stronger, more resilient Virgin Islands, better prepared to face the uncertainties of the future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

***# Change slide (40) – (Blank blue slide)***

***End of Testifier #3 testimony***

**Testifier #4: REYNALDO BESS – St. Croix Amateur Radio Club, President and TSA Security Officer**

Good morning to all present. Protocol having been established I would like to thank Committee Chairman Gittens for the opportunity to testify on this bill. My name is Reynaldo Bess. I am a native of St. Croix. My interest in ham radio was piqued when I joined the radio communication team at my current job. We conducted monthly radio communication exercises alongside FEMA and the Department of Defense. I was intrigued to see and hear how alternate communication was passed and delivered for the sake of emergency traffic. In addition to my amazement, equally motivating was listening to individual testimony on the use of ham radio to connect islanders with their loved ones on the mainland following Hurricane Hugo. In the last 9 years as an amateur radio operator, I have found that being a licensed radio operator continues to be a valuable asset for me and others, rather than just a hobby.

***# Change slide (41)– TSA and Ham Radio***

Currently, I am employed at the Transportation Security Administration, or TSA, in St. Croix. Beside screening passengers, one of my responsibilities is to lead all St. Croix TSA emergency radio communications. TSA uses amateur radio as a backup system to their primary communications. Following hurricanes Irma and Maria, TSA and local ham operators collaborated to reestablish intra-island TSA communications.

Outside of my work with TSA, I am currently president of the St. Croix Amateur Radio Club. The club consists of about 20 active members. The members know the importance of emergency communications and are ready, and willing, to serve the territory. Our club continues to exercise a partnership with local government agencies and non-governmental organizations for the interest of the territory.

***# Change slide (42) – Training and Community Outreach***

We are currently teaching a beginners ham radio license class at the St. Croix American Red Cross facility. The class includes the science of modulating electromagnetic radio waves to send and receive information as voice, data, or even Morse code. Second, the class teaches the effects of astronomy on radio waves such as ionospheric ionization, intensity from the sunspots cycle, refractions, diffractions, polarization, and scattering just to name a few. Thirdly, the class offers a lesson on the technology and functionality of radio equipment. Lastly, students must know the FCC rules and regulations governing the service. In short, individuals earning a ham operator license will be exposed to a wealth of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) curriculum. To stimulate ham radio interest in our youth, we have also given radio demonstrations at governmental and non-profit youth organizations on St. Croix. Demonstrations were conducted at Claude O. Markoe Elementary School, Ricardo Richards Elementary School, and with the Youth Stepping UP organization. There is also a ham club at the Antilles School on St. Thomas. It is worth noting that one of our youngest island hams to pass the entry level ham test was only 8 years of age. Youth is clearly the future of ham radio!

***# Change slide (43) – Owned Equipment Benefits***

Territory hams operate their own radio equipment and are responsible for programming and maintaining it. They have base stations at home, and mobile stations in their vehicles. The capability of some “amateur” stations exceed that of VI governmental stations.

Using their knowledge, they are capable of hands-on tasks, such as, troubleshooting circuits, building antennas, soldering connectors, etc. One interesting project involves the conversion of converting standard Wi-Fi routers to function as a stand-alone data network between islands. This network enables email and video to be passed without regular internet access.

A networked repeater system links hams throughout the Territory. It is even possible for licensed amateur radio operators to access the repeater system using an app on your phone. Best of all, most of these stations are available for public service to the Territory.

***# Change slide (44) – Net Operation***

On the public service front, hams routinely exercise their traffic handling skills in daily and weekly "nets", or formal on-air gatherings. The nets utilize an operating protocol similar to that utilized in an emergency. The daily weather net attracts 15 to 20 check-ins from the USVI, BVI, and Puerto Rico. Operators can even check-in to the net via an app on their cell phones. Another mock exercise dubbed “Moko Connect” involved the passing fictitious information and status of an unknown group of immigrants arriving in the Territory via boat. Past exercises have included providing logistical communications support for the IronMan triathlon on the island of St. Croix. These exercises and real-life experiences are augmented with a plethora of on-line seminars.

***# Change slide (45) – Field Day Exercise***

The granddaddy of readiness exercises is an annual event called Field Day. Ham clubs on all three islands, and throughout North America, literally set up “in the field” using temporary power and antennas and operate for 24-hours. Frequently the VITEMA command van is used to ensure its functionality and to familiarize hams with its operation. While exercising equipment and operator competency is a main goal, Field Day also serves as an ideal opportunity to show-case amateur radio and its capabilities.

Finally, as an amateur radio operator, we find the responsibility for giving back to the community; serving as teachers and sharing our wealth of knowledge and experience of operating a ham radio with local schools, youth programs, and other interested organizations via the engaging STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) curriculum.

Thank you for your time and I encourage you to vote in favor of AuxComm.

***# Change slide (46) – (Blank blue slide)***

***End of Testifier #4 Testimony***

**Testifier #5: STEVEN DEBLASIO - VITEMA, Assistant Director**

**At the END of Mr. DeBlasio’s testimony**

***# Change slide – Thank You – AuxComm Bill of 2023***

***Notes:***

1. ***Mr. DeBlasio will not require PowerPoint graphics with his testimony.***
2. ***Mr. DeBlasio is the last schedule testifier.***