

Good morning, Honorable Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety; Vice-Chair Honorable Ray Fonseca; and all other honorable members of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety. Morning to all other distinguished Senators of the 35th Legislature, legislative staff, and the listening and viewing audience

My name is Jerome Pineda, and I am a member of the Philippine Community here in St. Croix. Today I would like to provide testimony in support of bill number 35-0013, An act amending Title 20 Virgin Islands Code, Part II, Chapter 35, relating to the issuance of operators' licenses and identification cards to allow applicants to obtain limited local purpose identification cards and operators' licenses without providing certain federally required documentation.

I would like to share my personal story and some of my fellow Filipinos as to why this bill will benefit me and others traveling into the territory on a J1-Visa and H1b-Visa and their dependents (spouse and children).

First, I would like to thank the Department of Education, and We Dare to Teach for giving us the opportunity to teach and learn the culture of the people here in the US Virgin Islands. It is a great honor to serve and be part of this wonderful community.

I came to the Island of St Croix as a J-1 Visa holder in a Teacher Exchange Program. This program allows us to teach full-time for up to 3 years, and an extension of 2 years can also be given depending on our sponsor, giving us a total of 5 years to teach. We are also allowed to bring our dependents or the J-2 visa holders. Any J-2 visa with the Employment Authorization Document can also work during the period of our J-1 program, and they are also given a Social Security Number.

During the time when I had a J-1 visa, I was able to get a driver's license with a validity of 3 years. The USVI Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) followed the validity of my J-1 visa. Other Filipino teachers and their dependents waited for other documents like Social Security Number (SSN) and other valid IDs to get a driver's license. While waiting for their documents to apply for a driver's license, they tried their best to survive and get to places like the market, schools, training facilities, and to see our beautiful beaches to learn the culture and to be part of the community as well.

Rain or shine, some families walk to their assigned schools or walk to their respective schools after dropping off by a van because the school is out of their route, for example, John H Woodson and Alfredo Andrews School. Some of my colleagues and their families endure squeezing into the car. Five-passenger cars become six to seven-passenger cars.

After three years, I must renew my visa. With the help of the Department of Education, I was able to have my H1-B (working visa). I waited for my documents, and luckily, they came on time, and I was able to renew my driver's license on time. During those times, some of my colleagues were still waiting for their visa extensions and couldn't renew their driver's licenses. Leaving them to drive with expired driver's licenses.

H-4 visa or the H-1b dependents are not permitted to work in the United States and cannot obtain Social Security Numbers; hence the USVI Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) can't process their driver's license since they don't have the Social Security Number (SSN).

Families with H-4 visas are having a hard time getting a driver's license to at least help their family with simple things like dropping their children at school, going to the market, or even going to laundry shops.

Your honor, these are the difficulties we are having now in our community. Hopefully, with the proposed bill, we will be able to help most people needing a driver's license.

I would like to thank Senator Samuel Carrion for sponsoring this measure and Senator Gittens for allowing me the opportunity to testify on Bill Number 34-0013. I would like to urge the other committee members to vote in the affirmative to this bill that allows individuals to obtain a driver's license and Virgin Islands identification card without any federal documents. This is for our safety and the safety of all drivers on the road.