



Testimony from the Office of Gun Violence Prevention

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Greetings to members of the legislature and our listening audience. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to provide you with an update of the progress of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention. I am Tony Emanuel, the Executive Director. Currently we have a full complement of team members filling the positions in both districts, Community Engagement Coordinators, Survivor Engagement Specialists and Violence Interrupters. Since being operational the team has engaged in the community, utilizing strategies and fostering activities that have helped curb violence occurring in our communities.

Working in collaborative partnerships with other government agencies, local and federal law enforcement agencies, non-profit organizations, private businesses, and faith-based groups, we have been able to provide services, and share information used to assist citizens in avoiding violence and dealing with the aftermath of violence.

Partnerships in this work are critical, and I never speak without acknowledging collaborative partnerships. First are our guardians of the Virgin Islands Police Department. Their increased visibility and saturation work has yielded impressive results as well as their interdiction work, making arrests and closing cases. We also commend our other local and federal law enforcement agencies for their work here in the territory and their commitment to high level investigations and readiness. Their presence and affecting needed arrest of those individuals driving violence is always critical.

Another major partner is the Department of Education. With the help of teachers, staff, and administrators we have coordinated anti-violence and anti-bullying presentations to about five thousand students' territory wide. Our office collaborates closely with the school staff that identifies at-risk students. We facilitated intense and direct engagement teaching the CDCs (Choices Decisions and Consequences) to help change mindsets by arming them with tools that help improve self-regulated personal behavior, avoid conflict, and improve communication skills.

In addition to schools, we also provide trainings, seminars, and presentations within the community on Workplace Violence Prevention, Active Shooter Response, De-escalation, Customer Service, Inappropriate Touching and Sexual Harassment, Procedural Justice, Conflict Resolution and Community Leadership Principles and Ethics.

We also partner with Housing Authority, Health Department and Human services facilitating after-school programs, Wellness Programs and other activities with selected housing communities and an Enrichment Program at the Youth Rehabilitation Center. In the time the Office of Gun Violence has been operating the team has facilitated, participated, or sponsored over a hundred events aimed or focused on violence prevention.

While the Community Outreach Coordinators coordinate programs and events with other agencies and organizations, our Violence Interrupters have been an influential part of the reduction of murders. On both islands our Violence Interrupters intervened in volatile situations leading to peaceful resolutions of personal disputes. The Survivor Engagement Specialists have been equally busy assisting victims, and families of victims directly affected by violence by offering support, counseling or referrals and connecting them with appropriate resources.

Although, each team member may have a particular title and responsibility the entire team works for the goals of the unit often overlapping responsibility which is to keep our citizens SAFE, ALIVE and FREE!!! We accomplish this by being engaged in our community and working in partnerships with other government agencies, businesses, faith-based groups, and non-profit organizations.

I want to take this moment to also acknowledge the non-profit organizations that are in this fight and doing the work to help members of our community. Those organizations are instrumental in being that catalyst for change. The struggle for nonprofit organizations to continue to operate and supplement outreach efforts can be surmountable and sometimes forces the shuttering of those organizations. For us to be successful it must be a multi-agency and multi-pronged approach. We cannot do this in a vacuum.

We are managing gun violence as a health epidemic and have NO law enforcement responsibility or capability. We do not investigate crimes, nor do we search for or seize weapons. We respect the efforts of law enforcement and assist in any way we can as well as we can from a citizen's perspective.

As I close, I will say without reciting a number for fear of it going bad there has been a reduction of homicides in our territory and that is a good thing. We pray to continue this trend. I appreciate the opportunity to come before you and share the work we have been doing. Thank you for your time and attention.