

Testimony of Dr. Safiya George

Chairman Frederick, members of the Committee, and distinguished colleague. Good day. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the University of the Virgin Islands regarding sustainable economic development, workforce advancement, research, and data-informed decision-making. I commend this body for recognizing that sustainable economic development must improve lives today while safeguarding the resources and systems that will sustain future generations.

As the Territory's only public institution of higher education, and a proud historically Black, land-grant university, the University of the Virgin Islands serves as an anchor institution for workforce development, applied research, innovation, and technical partnership. Our role is not only to educate, but to strengthen the Territory's long-term capacity to plan, implement, and sustain economic progress.

Today, the Virgin Islands stands at a pivotal moment. With approximately \$25 billion in federal investments flowing into our Territory, we have a generational opportunity. The critical question before us is how to ensure these investments translate into durable economic strength, workforce opportunity, infrastructure resilience, and improved quality of life. The University of the Virgin Islands stands ready to serve as a strategic partner to the Legislature and Government to ensure that these investments deliver measurable and lasting results.

Workforce Development: Building the Talent Pipeline for Economic Resilience

Sustainable economic development begins with people. The Virgin Islands must continue to build a highly skilled local workforce capable of supporting emerging sectors such as renewable energy, digital technology, healthcare, marine science, agriculture, infrastructure, entrepreneurship, and tourism.

Through programs such as the Center for Marine and Environmental Studies, UVI has graduated 136 students with advanced degrees in marine and environmental sciences, with many now serving in key territorial and federal agencies such as the Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources, NOAA, and the National Park Service. These graduates are directly strengthening the Territory's technical capacity to manage its natural resources and support sustainable development.

Similarly, the Virgin Islands Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (VI-EPSCoR), supported by both the Legislature and the National Science Foundation, has invested more than \$50 million in building the Territory's STEM workforce pipeline,

supporting research, teacher development, and youth programs that prepare Virgin Islanders for future careers in science, technology, and innovation.

UVI CELL, the University's Center for Excellence in Leadership and Learning, further strengthens workforce readiness through continuing education, technical certification, and entrepreneurship training aligned with the Territory's economic needs. As an approved Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act training provider, UVI CELL enables Virgin Islanders to access tuition-free workforce credential pathways, including renewable energy, culinary arts, aviation, maritime, construction, and healthcare training programs. These programs directly support the Territory's infrastructure, tourism, healthcare, and blue economy sectors while strengthening economic mobility and workforce resilience.

Through entrepreneurship training, small business development initiatives, and workforce reintegration programs, UVI CELL has helped hundreds of Virgin Islanders build businesses, develop career pathways, and reenter the workforce, strengthening local wealth creation and community stability. Initiatives such as the St. John Community Resource and Development Center expand equitable access to workforce and business development services across the Territory.

Beyond workforce preparation, UVI's Office of Research and Economic Development has strengthened strategic partnerships across the Territory to align workforce training, research, and economic development priorities. UVI has collaborated closely with the Research and Technology Park to support innovation-driven enterprises, with the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture to advance food security and agricultural sustainability, and with the Virgin Islands Department of Health to attract biomedical research, expand telehealth infrastructure, and improve healthcare access for residents.

Continued legislative support will allow UVI to expand workforce training, technical certification, internships, and embedded technical staff programs to ensure that Virgin Islanders are prepared to fill the jobs created by federal infrastructure and economic investments.

Strengthening Data Infrastructure and Planning Capacity

Economic sustainability depends on informed decision-making. Currently, data related to infrastructure performance, workforce trends, land use, and economic activity remain fragmented across agencies, limiting coordinated planning and efficient investment.

UVI plays a critical role in addressing this challenge through initiatives such as the Virgin Islands Virtual Information System (VIVIS), which provides comprehensive education and

workforce outcome data that can guide policy decisions and workforce planning. Continued legislative support for integrated territorial data systems will strengthen economic planning, align education with workforce demand, and improve long-term outcomes.

UVI's Eastern Caribbean Center further strengthens the Territory's data infrastructure by producing reliable demographic, economic, and behavioral data essential for policymaking, grant acquisition, and public planning. Initiatives such as the Street Addressing Initiative and territory-wide behavioral health assessments improve the Territory's ability to deliver services efficiently, attract federal investment, and make informed policy decisions.

Additionally, strengthening digital infrastructure, research computing capacity, and modern teaching technologies will ensure that our students are prepared for an economy increasingly shaped by automation, artificial intelligence, and data science.

Monitoring and Protecting the Territory's Natural and Economic Assets

The Virgin Islands' natural resources, including our coastlines, water systems, and ecosystems are not only environmental assets but core economic infrastructure supporting tourism, housing, and public safety.

Currently, the Territory lacks sufficient long-term monitoring systems to track land-use change, infrastructure performance, and natural resource conditions. Without reliable data, infrastructure investments may be misaligned with future needs.

UVI is uniquely positioned to serve as the Territory's technical backbone for coordinated monitoring systems, providing research expertise, workforce training, and analytic capacity to support informed infrastructure and economic planning.

Innovation, Entrepreneurship, Health, and Technology-Driven Growth

UVI supports economic diversification through innovation, entrepreneurship, applied research, and technology development that directly benefit the Territory.

Major federal investments in autonomous ocean research, sustainability innovation, and biomedical research infrastructure are strengthening the Territory's research ecosystem, attracting external funding, and supporting economic growth.

UVI's Caribbean Exploratory Research Center advances public health research and intervention programs, while new biomedical research and telehealth initiatives improve healthcare access and position the Territory to attract health-related innovation enterprises.

The Caribbean Green Technology Center supports innovation across energy, water, agriculture, and environmental systems, preparing the workforce needed for emerging green economy sectors.

These efforts demonstrate that investment in UVI yields measurable returns in workforce development, economic growth, public health, and quality of life.

Strategic Opportunities for Legislative Investment in Partnership with the University of the Virgin Islands

The historic \$25 billion in federal funding presents an unprecedented opportunity to build lasting institutional capacity that will sustain the Virgin Islands for generations. Strategic legislative investment in partnership with UVI will ensure that these funds produce measurable economic returns while strengthening local workforce capacity and reducing reliance on external expertise.

The Legislature can maximize impact through targeted investments in the following areas:

1. Territorial Workforce Development Accelerator

Establish a UVI-led workforce accelerator aligned with federally funded infrastructure, energy, healthcare, and construction projects. This would provide accelerated training, certifications, apprenticeships, and technical workforce pipelines to ensure Virgin Islanders fill the jobs created by federal investments.

2. Territorial Data and Decision-Support Center

Create a centralized Territorial Data and Decision-Support Center at UVI, integrating economic, workforce, infrastructure, and environmental data to guide government planning, improve investment efficiency, and strengthen grant competitiveness.

3. Infrastructure and Natural Systems Monitoring Network

Invest in a UVI-led territorial monitoring network to track infrastructure performance, coastal resilience, water systems, and land-use changes. This will ensure infrastructure investments are protected and maintained efficiently over time.

4. Innovation and Entrepreneurship Expansion Hub

Expand UVI's innovation ecosystem, including business incubators, entrepreneurship training, and applied research commercialization, to support local business growth, attract external investment, and diversify the Territory's economy.

5. Healthcare, Telehealth, and Biomedical Workforce Development

Strengthen UVI's biomedical research and healthcare workforce programs to improve healthcare access, expand telehealth services, and position the Territory as a regional center for health innovation.

6. Embedded Technical Expertise for Government and Infrastructure Projects

Establish formal programs placing UVI-trained technical professionals within government agencies to support infrastructure implementation, performance monitoring, and long-term sustainability of federally funded projects.

These strategic investments will ensure that federal funding builds permanent local capacity, strengthens economic resilience, and creates sustainable opportunity for Virgin Islanders.

Strategic Recommendations for Legislative Action

To maximize the impact of federal investments and ensure sustainable economic growth, the University of the Virgin Islands respectfully recommends continued investment in workforce development, territorial data systems, infrastructure monitoring, innovation capacity, and formal partnership frameworks that position UVI as a core implementation partner supporting the Territory's long-term economic success.

Conclusion

Sustainable economic development requires vision, coordination, and sustained investment in people, knowledge, and institutional capacity.

The University of the Virgin Islands stands ready to partner with this Legislature to ensure that the unprecedented resources now available to our Territory are transformed into lasting economic strength, workforce opportunity, and improved quality of life.

Together, we can build a Virgin Islands that is resilient, prosperous, and prepared for the future. Thank you for your leadership and your commitment to the people of the Virgin Islands. I look forward to your questions and continued collaboration.