



**UNITED STATES
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U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Tourism
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**Testimony before the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture
36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands
Block II
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Good morning, Chairman Hubert L. Frederick of the Committee on Economic Development & Agriculture; distinguished members of the Committee; Senators of the 36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands; legislative staff; members of the media; and the listening and viewing public.

I am Assistant Commissioner, Marketing and Communications, Alani Henneman, of the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Tourism. Pursuant to your invitation, I am submitting the following testimony into the record. On behalf of the Department of Tourism, I will provide testimony regarding the impact, response, and future of airlift in the Territory following the disruption of Spirit Airlines' service.

The operational disruption experienced by Spirit Airlines created challenges for the U.S. Virgin Islands and many destinations across the Caribbean and the United States that relied on the carrier's service. As a destination whose economy is heavily dependent on tourism, maintaining strong and reliable air connectivity remains one of the Department's highest priorities.

The timing of this disruption is particularly important because the Territory entered 2026 with significant momentum in visitor arrivals and airlift. The first quarter of 2026 recorded **303,388 visitor arrivals**, representing a **12 percent increase year-over-year** and a **6 percent increase compared with the same period in 2024**. March delivered particularly strong results, with **121,716 total arrivals**, a **23 percent increase over March 2025** and **14 percent above the previous record set in 2024**. St. Thomas welcomed **98,284 arrivals**, up **24 percent year-over-year**, while St. Croix recorded **23,432 arrivals**, representing a **20 percent increase**.

Through June 2026, the Territory continued to demonstrate strong visitor demand, with **464,289 arrivals to St. Thomas** and **108,604 arrivals to St. Croix**. These results keep the Territory on pace to match or exceed 2025 performance, with current year-end projections estimating more than **900,000 visitor arrivals**.

Following the announcement of Spirit Airlines' operational disruption in early May 2026, the Department responded quickly by launching the **Stranded Passenger Program**, a relief outreach initiative designed to support visitors whose travel to or from the U.S. Virgin Islands was impacted by the airline's operational changes.

The program provided a direct channel for travelers seeking additional assistance and demonstrated the Department's commitment to visitor care, responsiveness, and maintaining a positive destination experience during unforeseen challenges. Through this proactive outreach effort, the Department received **422 requests for assistance**, helping hundreds of visitors navigate an unprecedented airline disruption.

The experience reinforced an important aspect of our role as a tourism department: our responsibility extends beyond marketing the destination. It also includes ensuring that visitors feel supported and cared for when unforeseen circumstances affect their travel experience.

From an airlift perspective, the impact of Spirit's departure is significant. Between May and December 2026, the Territory is projected to lose **646 scheduled flights**, including **565 flights serving St. Thomas** and **81 flights serving St. Croix**. This reduction represents a loss of approximately **133,889 airline seats** across the Territory, including **122,273 seats affecting St. Thomas** and **11,616 seats affecting St. Croix**.

Based on historical load factors and demand trends, these reductions are projected to result in approximately **99,128 fewer passenger arrivals** through the remainder of 2026. Of that total, approximately **92,953 lost arrivals are projected for St. Thomas** and **6,175 for St. Croix**.

These numbers underscore the importance of maintaining a diversified and resilient airlift network. While the loss of Spirit capacity presents a meaningful challenge, the Department has remained proactive in engaging existing and prospective airline partners to replace lost capacity, strengthen existing routes, and identify new gateways to the Territory.

Several important service expansions are expected to strengthen connectivity during the remainder of the 2026/2027 travel season. These include **Fly the Whale's daily service between Puerto Rico and St. Thomas**, **United Airlines' forthcoming Newark, New Jersey service to St. Croix**, and **Breeze Airways' daily service from Tampa to St. Thomas**.

The Territory is also strengthening its regional Caribbean connectivity. The forthcoming launch of **Contour Airlines' direct daily service between St. Thomas and St. Maarten** will further enhance regional accessibility and complement existing service to destinations including the Dominican Republic, Anguilla, St. Kitts, St. Barthélemy, and Nevis.

These new and expanded services will not fully offset the capacity lost through Spirit's operational changes, but they represent meaningful progress toward rebuilding that capacity and, importantly, diversifying the Territory's airlift portfolio. Our goal is not simply to replace the seats that have been lost, but to build a broader and more resilient network that connects the U.S. Virgin Islands to a greater number of domestic and international markets.

The Department will continue working closely with airline partners, tourism stakeholders, and government counterparts to protect existing service, attract new routes, support route performance through strategic marketing, and identify additional growth opportunities. The strong visitor arrival numbers we have seen thus far demonstrate that demand for the U.S. Virgin Islands remains strong. Our responsibility is to ensure that the Territory has the connectivity necessary to meet that demand and sustain the continued growth of our tourism economy.



While the Department remained focused on addressing the Territory's airlift challenges, we also successfully supported one of the U.S. Virgin Islands' signature cultural events—the **2026 St. John Celebration**.

The St. John Celebration once again served as a vibrant reflection of the island's history, culture, and close-knit community, welcoming visitors while honoring traditions that have long defined the island. Beyond its cultural significance, the celebration generated meaningful economic activity for local businesses, artisans, entertainers, food vendors, and transportation providers while reinforcing St. John's important role within the Territory's year-round tourism product.

Despite the air service disruption experienced earlier in the season, visitor demand remained strong throughout the celebration period. During the festival, **39,799 visitors** traveled to St. John through St. Thomas, representing an **8 percent increase over the previous year**, demonstrating the continued strength of the destination and the resilience of the Territory's tourism industry.

The celebration also generated measurable economic benefits for the local community. Revenues from the Food Fair, vendor booths, and pageant activities totaled **\$32,915**, providing direct opportunities for local entrepreneurs and small businesses to participate in one of the Territory's premier cultural events. While no Community Impact Fund grants were awarded during this celebration season, the Department remains committed to identifying future opportunities that strengthen community engagement and support local organizations.

This year's celebration featured an exceptional lineup of regional and international performers, including Grammy Award-winning artist **Ashanti**, **Kes the Band**, **Pressure Busspipe**, **Pumpa**, **Bunji Garlin** and **Fay-Ann Lyons**, **Tarrus Riley**, **Baby Cham**, **Mr. Killa**, **Lyrikal**, **Erphaan Alves**, **WCK**, and many talented Virgin Islands performers. Their participation elevated the profile of the festival while celebrating the rich musical heritage that distinguishes the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The success of the 2026 St. John Celebration was made possible through months of coordinated planning led by the Division of Festivals under the leadership of Director Ian Turnbull and Assistant Director for St. John Leona Smith. Their efforts brought together numerous government agencies, public safety officials, first responders, transportation partners, public works personnel, and community stakeholders to ensure a safe, well-organized, and memorable celebration for residents and visitors alike.

The successful execution of St. John Celebration, despite the challenges presented by changes in air service, underscores both the resilience of the Territory's tourism industry and the Department's commitment to supporting the cultural events that strengthen our economy, showcase our heritage, and inspire visitors to return to the U.S. Virgin Islands.



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Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. The Department of Tourism remains committed to working with the Legislature, our agency partners, and the private sector to strengthen airlift, support cultural events, and ensure the continued growth and success of the U.S. Virgin Islands tourism economy.