

Good morning Chairman Violet, Vice Chair Lewis, members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, Senator Milton Potter, distinguished officials, and members of the Virgin Islands community.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of Bill No. 36-0133, legislation that would establish mental health education and instruction within our schools from kindergarten through 12th grade.

My name is Dr. Yassin Hall. I am a proud Virgin Islander, mental health advocate, educator, author, and motivational speaker.

This bill is not just policy to me.

This is personal.

This is survival.

This is generational healing.

I come before you as someone who grew up in a household impacted by untreated mental illness. Both of my parents suffered from mental health conditions that were never properly addressed in time, most notably my mother, who was later diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.

At the age of 12, during a severe mental health episode, my mother attempted to take my life.

What made that experience even more devastating was the complete lack of mental health systems available in the Virgin Islands at that time. There was little to no trauma support for children like me. There were virtually no mental health facilities. There were no school mental health counselors available to students from my firsthand experience. After my mother's psychiatric episode, she was brought back into the home almost immediately without long term treatment, family stabilization, or sufficient support systems in place.

As a child, I was left traumatized, vulnerable, and forced to continue living in fear that the violence could happen again.

For years, I carried that pain in silence.

That silence later became my purpose.

I wrote the book *Journey Untold: My Mother's Struggle with Mental Illness* because I knew there were countless Virgin Islands families silently suffering the same way mine did. I wanted to humanize mental illness and break the stigma that has existed in our culture for generations.

Following the release of my book and book tour, I launched the *Ending the Stigma USVI* campaign in 2015, where I traveled throughout the territory speaking directly to students about mental health, trauma, suicide prevention, stigma, and emotional wellness.

I spoke at:

- Charlotte Amalie High School
- Ivanna Eudora Kean High School
- Addelita Cancryn Junior High School
- Arthur A. Richards Junior High School
- Julius Sprauve School
- and other schools throughout the Virgin Islands

What I witnessed firsthand broke my heart.

At Addelita Cancryn Junior High School on St. Thomas, I was surprised by how aware many students already were of mental illness around them. Students openly described behaviors they witnessed on the streets and asked questions like, "What kind of mental illness does that person have?" Others described behaviors happening inside their own homes and wondered if what they were witnessing was mental illness.

On St. John, students were less exposed to severe mental illness in public settings compared to St. Thomas and St. Croix, but many still asked questions related to PTSD, depression, trauma, and emotional suffering within families and communities.

In my opinion, St. Croix appeared to be the most heavily impacted.

What we witnessed there forced us to stop after only two classroom sessions because it became emotionally overwhelming. We realized we could not continue opening up children's trauma and emotions without having adequate systems in place to help them afterward.

The students were afraid to raise their hands publicly and speak about what they were experiencing. Instead, many whispered their questions into our ears privately.

One young man told me his father was molesting him and asked if that was mental illness.

One young lady asked if her uncle exposing himself inside the home was mental illness.

Other students quietly shared experiences involving inappropriate touching, abuse, trauma, violence, addiction, fear, and emotional instability inside their homes.

What disturbed me most was realizing that many of these children had normalized these experiences because dysfunction, trauma, untreated mental illness, abuse, and emotional suffering had become part of everyday life in their environments.

In communities where trauma becomes normal, people stop recognizing the crisis.

That experience changed me forever.

It showed me that the Virgin Islands was not simply facing a mental health issue. We were facing a generational crisis of untreated trauma, silence, abuse, and emotional pain among our youth.

That is why this bill matters.

Mental health education saves lives.

My work in the Virgin Islands was also deeply informed by my years of experience with NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

In 2010, I began working with NAMI Orlando as a young presenter in the nationally recognized *Ending the Silence* program. Through that work, I presented in more than 113 schools throughout Orlando and later continued presenting in Gwinnett County, Georgia until 2017.

The *Ending the Silence* program was created to educate youth about mental health awareness, stigma reduction, early intervention, and help seeking behaviors. Research on the program has shown improvements in students' understanding of mental illness, reduced stigma, and increased willingness among young people to seek help.

But beyond the research, I witnessed the impact firsthand.

I watched students who had been silently struggling finally open up about depression, trauma, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. I watched classrooms become safer spaces for emotional conversations. I watched education begin breaking cycles of silence and shame surrounding mental illness.

That experience showed me that mental health education in schools is not optional. It is lifesaving.

And that is exactly why this legislation is necessary for the Virgin Islands.

Today, we have made progress. Schools now have mental health counselors in ways they did not when I was growing up. But more is still needed.

We need:

- consistent mental health education
- early intervention programs
- trauma informed school systems
- properly trained counselors
- accessible treatment resources
- and culturally competent support for Virgin Islands families

This bill represents prevention.

This bill represents awareness.

This bill represents hope.

I also stand before you today not only as an advocate, but as someone who has actively worked to help advance mental health legislation in this territory.

In 2023, the Georgia General Assembly formally recognized my mental health advocacy and community impact through House Resolution 441, honoring my efforts in advancing mental health awareness, education, and legislative initiatives benefiting the people of the U.S. Virgin Islands and communities beyond.

My advocacy efforts helped support the passage of:

- Bill No. 31-0134, which focused on funding mental health services for residents in need
- Bill No. 31-0279, which addressed mental health support and grief and stress counseling training for public school counselors

I also assisted with legislation related to strengthening mental health intervention laws, including Bills 32-0084 and 32-0085.

So today, I am asking this Legislature to continue that progress.

Because untreated mental illness does not only impact one individual.

It impacts children.

Families.

Schools.

Communities.

And future generations.

No child should have to experience what I experienced at 12 years old.

No child should suffer in silence because adults were too uncomfortable to discuss mental health openly.

And no family should be left without resources, education, or support.

Bill No. 36-0133 is more than education policy.

It is an investment in prevention, healing, and the future of the Virgin Islands.

I respectfully urge this body to pass Bill No. 36-0133.

Thank you, Chairman Violet, members of the Committee, and Senator Potter for allowing me the opportunity to testify today and for your continued commitment to the mental health and well being of the people of the Virgin Islands.