



December 2, 2025

Honorable Avery L. Lewis, Chairman
Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection
Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Capitol Building
P.O. Box 1690
St. Thomas, VI 00802

Testimony: Bill No. 36-0190 – Providing for Sign Language Interpreters at all Government of the Virgin Islands Broadcasts and Official Functions

Good day, Honorable Chairman Avery Lewis, members of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection, other members of the 36th Legislature, Legislative staff, and the listening and viewing audience. My name is Ms. Shamika Thomas, and I am the Executive Director of the Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VIUCEDD). Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Bill No. 36-0190, legislation that mandates the provision of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters for all live televised broadcasts and official functions of the Government of the Virgin Islands. I would like to thank Senator Angel L. Bolques, Jr., for introducing this important measure that advances accessibility, equity, and inclusion across our territory.

This bill addresses a longstanding and urgent gap in communication access for members of our community who are deaf or hard of hearing. According to the 2019 American Community Survey by the Eastern Caribbean Center at the University of the Virgin Islands, more than 2,500 individuals in the U.S. Virgin Islands report some degree of hearing difficulty. For many of them, American Sign Language (ASL) is not just a tool, it is their primary and most effective language. During emergencies, health crises, and public announcements, the absence of ASL interpreters can leave these residents without timely, accurate, and life-saving information.

Importantly, this legislation proposes the creation of a new section, §12A, within Title 1 of the Virgin Islands Code, which outlines the general provisions governing the operation of the Government of the Virgin Islands. This addition would formally mandate the use of qualified ASL interpreters at government events and during live televised communications, embedding accessibility into the legal framework of our public institutions.

ASL is a complete and natural language with its own grammar and structure, distinct from English. For those raised in Deaf culture or who became deaf early in life, English may not be fully accessible, especially in written or captioned form. ASL interpretation provides the clarity, immediacy, and cultural accuracy needed for meaningful understanding. Captioning is not a substitute, particularly for complex government communications. The inclusion of certified ASL interpreters ensures that information is not just delivered but is effectively received by all members of our community.

At VIUCEDD, our mission is to promote inclusion and self-determination for people with disabilities through advocacy, research, and policy. As part of a national network of 67 University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, we work every day to ensure that individuals with disabilities, regardless of where they live, have access to the same opportunities and information as anyone else. The proposed Bill is an example of policy in action that aligns with that mission. It helps the Virgin Islands fulfill the promise of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which celebrates its 35th anniversary this year and affirms the right to effective communication for all.

I commend the bill for not only stating the requirement for ASL interpretation, but also clearly outlining the roles of the Office of the Governor and the Department of Human Services in its implementation. By establishing interpreter qualifications, funding mechanisms, and enforcement provisions, this legislation provides a strong framework to ensure meaningful compliance and sustainable access.

Provost Dr. Lora Battle Bailey, on behalf of President Dr. Safiya George, also express strong support for Bill 36-0190. This bill aligns directly with UVI's mission and values to promote equity, inclusion, and full civic participation. UVI's longstanding work, especially through VIUCEDD's disability advocacy, community engagement, and American Sign Language training, has already laid critical groundwork for the Territory's ability to meaningfully implement this legislation. UVI leadership view communication access as both a civil right and a public safety imperative, and they reaffirm the University's readiness to partner with government agencies and stakeholders to expand ASL training, strengthen interpreter capacity, and support successful implementation.

The passage of Bill 36-0190 is more than a legal mandate; it is a statement of values. It reflects our collective belief that no Virgin Islander should be left behind because of a communication barrier, and that every resident deserves full access to the decisions and information that affect their lives. I respectfully urge you to support this bill and take this significant step toward making the Virgin Islands a model for disability access and inclusion in the Caribbean region. Thank you for your leadership and for your commitment to equity and justice for all.

Sincerely,

Shamika Thomas
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Executive Director of VIUCEDD