



GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
Law Enforcement Planning Commission

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Testimony Submitted to

36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs

Date of Hearing

10:00, Monday, June 23, 2025

Subject Matter

Bill No. 36-0090

Act amending Title 1 Virgin Islands Code
Chapter 11 by adding Section 200m to declare
The week beginning the Monday before the first
Friday in June as Virgin Islands Gun Violence Awareness Week

Bill Sponsor

Senator Angel L. Bolques, Jr.

Testifier - via written submission

Moleto A. Smith Jr.

Director

U. S. Virgin Islands Law Enforcement Planning Commission

Opening Statement

Greetings Committee Chair, Senator Avery Lewis, other members of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection, other members of the Legislature, other testifiers and the listening and viewing public.

I am Moleto A. Smith Jr., Director, U. S. Virgin Islands Law Enforcement Planning Commission (LEPC). I respectfully submit this written testimony to express my support of Bill No. 36-0090 An Act amending Title 1 Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 11 by adding Section 200m to declare the week beginning the Monday before the first Friday in June as Virgin Islands Gun Violence Awareness Week, sponsored by Senator Angel L. Bolques, Jr.

Due to previous commitments, out of the Territory, I am unable to attend this hearing.

Position of Support for Bill No. 36-0090

From the outset, I express support of Bill No. 36-0090, and overwhelming support and advocacy of any meaningful effort that promotes an enhance public awareness of the impact of gun violence in general, but more specifically its impact on violent crimes, including sexual assault, domestic violence and intimate partner abuse, homicide, and other violent acts against adults and children.

Furthermore, I strongly support initiatives that emphasize crime prevention and awareness, particularly in at-risk populations, as a significant component in the Territory's strategy for supporting justice system stakeholders and promoting safe communities.

These goals can only be achieved through active interagency coordination and mutual collaboration between all stakeholders, especially those who work directly on the issues.

For the first time, in July 2024, the U. S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued a seminal Surgeon General's Advisory on Firearm Violence, declaring firearm violence in America to be a public health

crisis, outlining the devastating and far-reaching consequences that firearm violence poses to the health and well-being of the country.

According to this report:

- The rates of firearm related death in the U. S. are significantly higher than in other high-income countries, reaching a near three-decade high in 2021.
- Black persons endured the highest age-adjusted firearm homicide rates across all ages
- The firearm suicide rate was significantly higher among Veterans in 2021 – 62% higher among Veteran men than non-Veteran men and 281.1% higher for Veteran women than non-Veteran women.
- In 2022, male children and adolescents, ages 1-19, were more than five times as likely than their female counterparts to die from a firearm-related injury, with Black children and adolescents accounting for about half of all the firearm-related deaths among U. S. children and adolescents, despite making up only 14% of the U. S. child and adolescent population.
- From 2019-2022, the mean number of emergency department visits for firearm injuries was consistently higher among young people, ages 15-24 years old, compared to all other age groups, with the youngest age group, ages 0-14 years old, seeing the largest increases in proportion of firearm-related injury emergency department.

The report further indicates that the impact of surviving a firearm injury includes short term and long-term physical, and mental health consequences, such as:

- limitations on physical functioning, chronic behavioral health problem like anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorders
 - psychiatric disorders
 - increase in substance use disorders, such as alcohol or drug use disorders
 - increase in rates of unemployment and substance use
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Advantages of Bill No. 36-0090

While the July 2024 report from the U.S. Surgeon General provides a national assessment of firearm-related violence, many of the indicators reported nationally, may have similar application locally. As related to the Virgin Islands, one can infer that exposure to incidents of gun violence, as experienced by school age children, young males particularly, women, the elderly and other vulnerable populations, affect the overall well-being of our communities.

For these reasons, establishing Gun Violence Awareness Week, as proposed in Bill No. 36-0090, will align with the LEPC's strategy of enhancing safe communities through enhancing interagency coordination among stakeholder organizations, while promoting training, awareness and prevention initiatives that support law enforcement efforts aimed at addressing gun violence in the Territory.

During this heightened week of gun violence awareness, emphasis may be places on initiatives that promote community safety, such as the following:

- Risk-based firearm prohibitions such as Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs) and Domestic Violence Protective Orders (DVPOs)
 - Safe firearm storage, for licensed firearm owners
 - Firearm Amnesty or Buy-back Programs
 - Community Violence Intervention (CVI) initiatives focusing on violence prevention, including community outreach, conflict resolution, support programs for at-risk individuals, youth programs and other activities promote safe communities
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- Community clean-up activities which mitigate and limit urban blight. According to a research article published in the American Journal of Public Health (AJPH) on November 10, 2016, entitled, “Urban Blight Remediation as a Cost-Beneficial Solution to Firearm Violence”, abandoned buildings and vacant lots are blighted structures seen daily by urban residents that may create physical opportunities for violence by sheltering illegal activities and illegal firearms. Urban blight remediation programs can be cost-beneficial strategies that significantly and sustainably reduce firearm violence. Programs that clean and rehabilitate abandoned properties are associated with a 39 percent lower gun violence rate.

Conclusion

Every resident has the right to live in safe communities. This right includes the ability to live peacefully in neighborhoods, communities and homes that are free of crime and violence, especially firearm-related violence.

Firearm-related violence as a major public health matter nationally is well documented. As with all public health matters, there are no easy quick-fix solutions to reducing firearm-related violence. Any solution requires a collaborative approach involving justice system stakeholder, community groups, and each of us.

Bill No. 36-0090, if enacted, will highlight the need of continued community awareness and collective collaboration on addressing the tragic impact of firearm-related violence of individuals and the overall safety of our communities.

I, enthusiastically, support this measure.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this measure. This concludes my written testimony.

End
