Honorable Milton E. Potter, President of the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands; Senator Ray Fonseca, Chairman on The Committee on Health, Hospitals, & Human Services; Senator Novelle E. Francis, Jr., Chairman of the Budget, Appropriations & Finance Committee and Sponsor of **Bill No. 36-0050**; other members of the 36th Legislature; fellow testifiers; members of the social work community, as well as the listening and viewing audience, I extend to you a warm Virgin Islands good day.

Thank you, Chairman Fonseca for the invitation and the opportunity to address this body on **Bill No. 36-0050- *An Act repealing and reenacting with amendments title 27 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 20, relating to the regulation of the profession of social work and social workers in the Virgin Islands.***

Let me first apologize for my absence here today, but it could not be helped. As I agonized over the emergent situation that unexpectedly came about, I eventually realized that there was only one right choice. As I reflected on what social workers around the globe do on a daily basis, I am reminded of the important and varied roles that we play in the community and most significantly, in our own families, and how my response to this urgent and potentially life-threatening situation appropriately fits into this discussion today. Thank you, Senator Fonseca, for understanding my dilemma and assuring me that this was the right choice.

Secondly, I would like to introduce myself and provide a brief snippet into my background as a social worker and a real-life example of why I am in strong support of this Bill.

My name is Yvonne Woods, and I am the Program Director of the Social Work Department at the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) where I am also an Assistant Professor who teaches social work courses on both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Our mission is to prepare social workers to honor and promote the resiliency of individuals, families, groups, communities, institutions, and systems in the Virgin Islands, the Caribbean, and its diaspora, through ethical, evidence-based practice and advocacy that centers on the cultural, historical, political, economic, and environmental experiences, needs, and rights of those served*.*

Our programs have two overarching goals:

* Goal One is to prepare students for ethical, competent generalist social work practice, which requires knowledge grounded in scientific inquiry, values that foster respect for differences, and trauma-informed, culturally responsive skills for promoting individual and community well-being.
* Goal Two is to advance the knowledge and skills of students as generalist practitioners to engage in ethical, evidence-based practices and advocacy with, and for, children, youth, and families in the VI, the Caribbean and its diaspora.

These two main goals serve as the foundation for designing the curriculum, assessing the effectiveness and core competency of students, and guide the program’s development, which are based on the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. These core competencies encompass a range of nine skills, and all the syllabi for the courses that the faculty teach are built on these nine competency areas.

As a direct and indirect service provider, I am in strong support of Bill Number **36-0050** because it addresses social work academics’ vital role in shaping the profession through teaching, research, and community engagement. As teachers, we are tasked with equipping future social workers with theoretical knowledge and practical skills, conducting research to advance the field, and contribute to policy discussions. We also mentor students, supervise their projects, and advise them on career paths to ensure they are well-prepared for their future roles. This licensure and regulation mandate is poised to significantly impact the reputation of social workers to effectively serve clients and boost their overall self-esteem.

In 1915 when education reformer, Abraham Flexner questioned whether social work was indeed a true profession, it was a transformative moment in history that may have provided the impetus for social work establishing itself as a respected and legitimate player in addressing societal issues and defining its role as a necessary part of society’s social structure.

As a life-long social worker, I welcome any opportunity to discuss these matters because it is through our collective efforts that we hold true to our purpose, which is to craft, update, and always maintain a functional human blueprint to support the wellbeing of every person in the local community, the diaspora, as well as those in the global communities that may need our support.

I strongly believe that when we support well-being, we not only ensure everyone’s ability to reach their potential and fully contribute to the community. It is also a means for helping our communities to thrive and remain a vibrant place to live, work, and play. It is in this spirit that I support **Bill No. 36-0050-an act *to regulate the social work profession and social workers in the Virgin Islands.*** It is a measure that is long overdue, and I want to again thank Senators Francis, Fonseca, and all the other stakeholders for illuminating and making this momentous journey a reality, particularly for social workers in the Virgin Islands.

As the profession continues to evolve dramatically and grow exponentially, it is expected that UVI and other schools of social work will pass the torch on to their students in advancing and shaping the profession through the process of teaching and sharing their knowledge and expertise with future generations of professionals. Regulation in social work teaching practice is to ensure the quality, consistency, and safety in the education and training of social workers through the enforcing of the standards of practice. These standards are often reviewed and updated to reflect best practices and evolving needs.

     Given the strict discipline, depth of social work knowledge, and tenacity it takes to become licensed, I agree with Mary Jo Monahan, former CEO of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), that licensure and regulation do help to “elevate” social work. She maintains that in practicing self-regulation, all social workers voluntarily adhere to the NASW *Code of Ethics.*Therefore, when a social worker becomes licensed, the aspirational goals of the *Code*become a legal obligation. Additionally, licensure establishes requirements to demonstrate competency to practice through graduation from an accredited program; experience; good character; and demonstration of the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for competent practice. But most importantly, regulation protects clients by providing them recourse and holding the licensed professional accountable to “do no harm.”

 According to Mary Jo, licensed professions, including social work, are legislatively declared as a professional practice affecting public health, safety, and welfare and subject to regulation and control in the public interest. ASWB’s Model Social Work Practice Act, which offers guidance about best practices for social work regulation, expands on that definition, stating: “only qualified persons should be permitted to engage in the practice.” Licensure and regulation therefore elevate the profession because the privilege to practice is recognized in law and is something that is earned. Maintaining a license therefore becomes a professional expectation.

In conclusion, I urge the committee to pass the Bill to ensure the continued effectiveness of social work practice in the Virgin Islands. By becoming licensed, social workers serve the public by embracing the social work values of service, integrity, competence, and social justice. Regulation promotes the profession because it transforms aspirations into legal standards, including ethical behavior and consumer recourse. But licensure allows for a lifetime of practice with opportunities to advance careers.

Before licensure was the law and required, there was no recourse for people who were harmed. When a state or jurisdiction licenses a social worker, we are assuring the public that these practicing social workers have met the minimum standards of competency for the profession. That assurance is at the heart of our commitment as regulators and gives the public an avenue to have their complaints addressed. Let’s face it, if licensure is the gateway to better public protection, it stands to garner more respect for the profession, and ultimately becomes one of the keys to ensuring that social workers can continue to do what we do best: helping others.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**Yvonne I. Woods, PhD, MSW, CSW**

program Director

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL WORK

Bachelor & Master of Social Work ProgramS

College of Liberal Arts and social sciences

2 john Brewers bay, oek campus, st thomas, VI, 00802-6004

**P:** (340) 693-1184

**E:** [yvonne.woods@uvi.edu](mailto:yvonne.woods@uvi.edu)

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