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Testimony of Troy de Chabert-Schuster

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In Support of Bill No. 36-0086 – The Caregivers Leave Act Amendment

Before the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands - Committee on Health, Hospitals & Human Services

Senator Ray C. Fonseca, Chairman

October 28, 2025

Honorable Chair Fonseca, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of AARP Virgin Islands in strong support of **Bill No. 36-0086**, The Caregivers Leave Act Amendment. On behalf of AARP, representing more than 100 million Americans age 50 and older, including over 22,000 right here in the Virgin Islands.

AARP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with a mission to empower people to choose how they live as they age. We advocate for policies that promote the well-being of older adults, strengthen families, and support caregivers—the backbone of our communities. **Bill No. 36-0086** aligns directly with this mission. It provides **four (4) hours** per month of paid leave for government employees to attend to essential caregiving duties. This legislation is both compassionate and practical, addressing one of the most urgent social and workforce challenges of our time.

In reviewing this legislation, AARP engaged in consultation with community and professional partners, including the Society for Human Resource Management Virgin Islands (SHRM VI), the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority's Mu Gamma Omega Chapter, retired and current Government of the Virgin Islands employees, and local business owners. Their collective experience informed our position and strengthened the bill's framework, ensuring that it reflects the realities faced by both caregivers and employers across the Territory.

Please allow me to share a personal perspective.

As State Director—and as someone who personally served as the primary caregiver for my late mother, Mrs. Rita de Chabert - Schuster—I understand both the emotional challenges and responsibilities faced by working caregivers. For twelve years, I began each day at dawn, preparing her meals and medications, while fulfilling my professional responsibilities, then returning home to provide care throughout the night. Each day brought a level of responsibility and devotion that required precision, patience, and unwavering love. To care for my mother, as she once did for me, was humbling and deeply affirming what unconditional love means. It became the most sacred duty to take care of the loved one who cared so deeply for me and my siblings. That experience shaped my understanding of why policies such as **Bill No. 36-0086** are not only compassionate but also essential. Caregiving is not simply a personal obligation; it is a community responsibility that embodies our saying, “one-one full a basket – when we all work together”.

The Need for Caregiver Support:

The need for caregiver support in the Virgin Islands is paramount as our Territory ages. Nearly **1 in 4** Virgin Islanders are over the age of 60, according to the 2020 census, and that number continues to grow each year. We are living longer but not necessarily healthier, and families are increasingly managing more complex medical needs, like Alzheimer's care – the need for more caregivers is imminent as the population ages.

Nationally, AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving report that more than 63 million Americans—approximately **1 in 5** adults—serve as family caregivers, often while maintaining full-time employment. AARP's 2023 publication, **Valuing the Invaluable**, underscores that these caregivers provide an estimated \$600 billion in unpaid labor each year, equivalent to nearly three times the Medicaid budget. Yet, only about 27 percent of U.S. workers have access to paid family leave benefits. These statistics represent our neighbors, colleagues, and family members.

Benefits to Employers and the Workforce:

The provisions of **Bill 36-0086** are not only morally important but also an economic strategy that benefits employers. AARP research shows that workers who have access to caregiver leave report greater loyalty, reduced stress, and improved productivity, resulting in a decrease in turnover costs.

By adopting this measure, the Virgin Islands government would model forward-thinking, responsible workforce policy for both the public and eventually the private sectors.

Accountability and Safeguards:

While AARP strongly supports this measure, we equally advocate for including safeguards against fraud and abuse within the bill. Requiring proof of caregiving responsibilities within a reasonable timeframe – such as five (5) or more working days when permissible. Additionally, defining the benefit as **non-accrual**—meaning it cannot be accumulated—balances support for caregivers without compromising the operations of the employers' business.

Expanding Caregiver Leave to the Private Sector:

While **Bill No. 36-0086** currently applies to government employees, AARP encourages this body to consider similar provisions for private-sector workers. As in many states, offering tax incentives could encourage Virgin Islands businesses to voluntarily establish caregiver leave programs. Supporting working caregivers is not only the right thing to do—it is sound business policy that promotes retention and productivity.

Conclusion and Call to Action:

Senators, this amendment is right for the Virgin Islands. **Bill 36-0086** will help working Virgin Islanders and their families, support government operations, and benefit workers and the economy, thereby helping family caregivers remain in their jobs. We urge you to vote in favor of **Bill 36-0086** by honoring those Virgin Islanders who labor in love as caregivers.

AARP thanks this body, particularly Senator Novelle E. Francis, for responding to our call to introduce this measure. We stand ready to work with this body, the Division of Personnel and local business owners to administer these benefits and explore other initiatives that support working family caregivers across the Territory.

References

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