



TESTIMONY FOR: Bill No. 36-0151 - An act amending title 23 Virgin Islands Code regarding the illegal possession of machine guns and machine gun conversion devices.

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Good day Honorable Senator Clifford Joseph, Chair of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety, esteemed members of the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, committee members, non-committee members present, and the listening and viewing audience.

I am Tony Emanuel, Executive Director of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, and I am here to offer testimony in support of **Bill No. 36-0151 - An act amending title 23 Virgin Islands Code regarding the illegal possession of machine guns and machine gun conversion devices.**

Having served in the military, law enforcement and of course my current position I find myself creating a love / hate relationship with weapons. As I appreciate our second amendment rights and do not support any mandatory surrender or seizure of legal firearms owned by law abiding citizens, I certainly recognize the threats posed by individuals inflicting harm in our communities utilizing illegally possessed firearms or altered firearms.

Certain weapons such as automatic weapons or “Machine Guns” and alterations of semi-automatic weapons is a problem and pose a distinct threat to law enforcement and the public. These types of weapons, although popular with gun enthusiasts, serve no legitimate civilian purpose for self-defense or sport and commonly used in criminal activity. Accordingly, their possession and use present an unacceptable risk to public safety and should be prohibited.

I understand this is a fiercely debated topic and people get very emotional about it. My feeling is unfortunately due to the irresponsible actions of a few individuals, we as a body need to attempt to take steps to protect the rest of our community. The goal here is not to infringe upon rights or punish legal gun owners. The goal is to put in place laws with stringent penalties that deter illegal possession of dangerous weapons and weapon altering devices and hold those found guilty of such crimes accountable.

When talking to citizens in our different communities I am saddened to hear our senior citizens describe the fear felt from hearing shots close to their homes, and afraid to venture out at night due to the possibility of gunfire. I spend an absorbent amount of time talking to young people about anti-violence and in particular “Gun Violence Prevention.” During those conversations it was alarming to hear young people describe being in fear due to the sounds of gun shots and even scarier is the sound of rapid fire or what sounds like the discharging of a machine gun. These experiences are stressful and create anxiety in children and adults. What I want us to recognize in addition to the immediate threat of death; there is also long-term damage to our children’s emotional and mental health.

Psychologists have created a list of “Adverse Childhood Experiences.” The theory suggests that these experiences cause disruption to the normal development of the brain causing emotional problems and learning disabilities in our youth. Exposure to violence or fear of violence are examples of Adverse Childhood Experiences. While tragic death is horrible, and families are shattered, there are also long-lasting effects of results of violence or perceived violence that can affect our community in hidden ways for years.

Another issue causing me great concern having experience with firearms as a firearms instructor over the years is the ability to control a machine gun or a weapon altered to fire repeatedly once the trigger is depressed. Once a weapon of this capability starts letting rounds loose the bullets are not staying in a tight pattern. Bullets do not have eyes or consciousness. In these instances when a perpetrator is firing at someone and they are in a crowd, innocent bystanders become entangled in the situation. Too often the attempted murder of one person turns into a mass casualty event due to poor weapon control and target acquisition. Last thing any of us want to hear about or see is a situation where multiple people become victims due to someone wielding a machine gun or altered weapon in attempts to get at one person.

I am not naïve to believe legislation or even more stringent laws will reduce or eradicate gun violence. I respect and understand the concerns of our gun rights enthusiasts and fully support 2nd Amendment rights. However, I will always be unapologetic about supporting measures that try to level the playing field level for law enforcement and keep civilians safe. Being under fire is bad enough, being under fire from an automatic weapon is on a total other level of danger that the average police officer is not prepared for. Doing nothing in my eyes is complicit. Legislation alone may not stop an event from happening but having the laws that have teeth in them supports law enforcement and the judicial system to deliver accountability for one's actions.

I have had heated debates with people over this topic, and this may be an unpopular or even contentious decision, but I will always err on the side of public safety than not take a stand on what I believe in. I urge this body to accept these amendments and humbly appreciate the opportunity to weigh in on this discussion and process. Thank you for your time and attention.