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Bill No. 36-0005

“An Act amending title 16 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 2, section 99 establishing a mandatory minimum bail amount in domestic violence cases”

Testifier: Ms. Anya Stuart, Executive Director, Family Resource Center, Inc. of St. Thomas, St. John and Water Island

Testimony in Support of Bill 36-0005

Good day to the distinguished members of the 36th Legislature, dedicated supporting staff, the attentive listening and viewing audiences. My name is Anya Stuart, I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of the Family Resource Center, a private non-profit organization committed to assisting victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other violent crimes in the districts of St. Thomas, St. John, and Water Island. Operating 24/7 with the support of our staff and trained volunteers, our agency is steadfast in its mission. I deeply appreciate this opportunity to address you today and share insights into the challenges faced by crime victims in our community, as well as the critical role we play in responding to their needs.

I am here today to voice strong support for Bill 36-0005, which proposes essential amendments to Title 16 of the Virgin Islands Code. By establishing a mandatory bail amount in domestic violence cases and introducing critical measures to safeguard victims, this bill marks a pivotal step in strengthening protections for survivors of such crimes within our community.

Domestic violence deeply impacts individuals, families, and the broader community. Survivors not only face physical harm but also emotional, psychological, and economic trauma. Ensuring their safety while holding offenders accountable is a responsibility that cannot be overstated. This bill addresses these needs in several key ways.

First, setting a mandatory bail amount ensures consistency and fairness in how domestic violence cases are handled. Moreover, the provision to prioritize a higher bail amount where applicable underscores the serious nature of these offenses and strengthens deterrence. This approach sends a clear message: the safety of victims and accountability for offenders are paramount.

The clause requiring the immediate revocation of bail and remand to custody if a defendant contacts the victim post-release is vital. Such contact often results in further trauma, intimidation, and danger for victims, undermining their ability to heal and regain a sense of security. This provision emphasizes the responsibility of the judicial system to protect victims throughout the legal process. By placing the burden on the defendant to

demonstrate they are no longer a danger to the victim, the bill prioritizes the survivor's safety and well-being.

The broader implications of this bill extends beyond individual cases. Implementing these measures fosters a culture of accountability and respect for victims, encouraging more survivors to come forward knowing their safety will be prioritized. It strengthens community trust in the justice system, signaling that domestic violence will not be tolerated and that victims will be supported at every step.

Additionally, the clause requiring immediate remand and bail revocation if the defendant contacts the victim after release strengthens organizations like Family Resource Center's ability to protect our clients. This provision empowers Family Resource Center, INC.(FRC) to work more effectively with law enforcement and the judiciary to address potential threats, ensuring victims can heal in a safe environment without fear of harassment or retaliation.

Overall, the bill's measures would directly support the goals of victim service organizations by creating a safer and more secure framework for survivors, allowing them to focus on recovery and rebuilding their lives. This enhanced safety also encourages more victims to seek help, knowing that their well-being is prioritized and legally protected.

Domestic violence has ripple effects, impacting children, families, and even community stability. Supporting survivors not only addresses their immediate needs but also contributes to breaking the cycle of violence. By passing Bill 36-0005, this legislature can lead the way in making the Virgin Islands a safer and more supportive place for survivors of domestic violence.

Organizations like Family Resource Center Inc., which provides critical support services to victims and survivors of domestic violence, would greatly benefit from the provisions in Bill 36-0005. FRC offers free services such as counseling, advocacy, safe housing, and crisis intervention. However, a major challenge that FRC faces is ensuring the ongoing safety of victims after offenders are released from custody.

The mandatory bail amount outlined in Bill 36-0005 would provide the Family Resource Center Inc. with increased confidence that offenders are held accountable and not quickly released back into the community without proper consideration for the safety of victims and, in many cases, their children. This measure reduces the likelihood of reoffending or further intimidation, offering survivors a stronger sense of security as they access support services through our organization.

In conclusion, I strongly urge you to vote in favor of this crucial legislation. It represents a significant advancement in victim protection and community safety, reflecting our collective commitment to justice and compassion.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for your dedication to this important issue.