



**COMMENTS TO THE 36th LEGISLATURE
BILL NO. 36-0231**



May 11, 2026

Established by Title 5, Section 3521, of the Virgin Islands Code, the Office of the Territorial Public Defender (OTPD) is charged with representing those individuals in the Territory who face the possibility of a jail sentence but cannot afford counsel. On behalf of OTPD, I am pleased to have the opportunity to present the position of my Office as to legislation before this body. I thank Chairman Clifford A. Joseph, Sr., and the members of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety, for the invitation to testify as to Bill No. 36-0231.

OTPD believes that Bill No. 36-0231 is an important and laudable measure that will have a positive impact on incarcerated Virgin Islanders, their families, and the community at large.

Many of you are aware of the recent death of 34-year-old N’Kosi Parris. Parris, a St. Croix native, was stabbed to death on April 9th during a brawl at the Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility located in Tutwiler, Mississippi.¹ While his crime occurred in the Territory, he was being housed in a private prison in Mississippi due to overcrowding at our own facilities. Mr. Parris was serving

¹ Mina Corpuz, *Stabbing death in Mississippi private prison raises concerns in US Virgin Islands*, Mississippi Today, April 24, 2026, <https://mississippitoday.org/2026/04/24/stabbing-death-mississippi-prison/>

a 35-year jail sentence after being convicted of Murder in a 2014 V.I. Superior Court prosecution. While we can be disturbed by the actions which led to Mr. Parris's conviction, he was not sentenced to death and should not have died while serving his jail sentence. Even if we do not yet know exactly how his death came about, the case of Mr. Parris can offer us direction and inspiration for improving how we manage those instances where a prisoner must be transferred off island. His death is a reminder of the important stakes involved in such transfers and the decision to set out a formal system of review will benefit future transferees.

Our law already sets expectations for those who the Territory holds in its custody. It is the mandate of the Bureau of Corrections to provide for the "security, custody and rehabilitation of correctional inmates."² The Territory has not only that legal requirement but also a moral requirement to consider the best interest of its citizens – even those that it decides to put behind bars. More than that, though, the custodial experience of our inmates is a crucial factor on whether they will correct their ways or fall into recidivism. After all, one of the most significant factors on whether a person will be jailed in the future is whether they are jailed today.

² 3 V.I.C. § 373(b)

Providing our inmates with regular access to family visits may be the most important impact should this Bill become law. Regular family visits significantly increase the likelihood that when the time comes for these men and women to be released from custody, they will be less likely to re-offend and less likely to return to prison. Regular visits maintain family ties and help to establish a continuum of social support between the prison and the community. A 2016 statistical meta-analysis published in the Journal of Criminal Justice concluded that regular visitation “resulted in a 26% decrease in recidivism.”³ Another study suggests that in addition to reducing recidivism, regular visitation could reduce symptoms of depression in inmates, as well as rule-breaking behavior during their incarceration.⁴ OTPD sees this legislation as offering hope to the possibility of our providing the best possible outcomes for these difficult situations.

I would like to take this opportunity to provide a possible addition to the legislation as presented. I believe that the Bill could benefit to a specific reference to transfers where physical health issues are an important factor.

³ Meghan M. Mitchell, et al., *The effect of prison visitation on reentry success: A meta-analysis*, Journal of Criminal Justice, December 2016, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047235216300575>.

⁴ Karen De Claire & Louise Dixon, *The effects of Prison Visits from Family Members on Prisoners' Well-Being, Prison Rule-Breaking, and Recidivism: A Review of Research Since 1991*, Trauma, Violence, and Abuse, June 23, 2016.

Subsection (f)(2) of the Bill states that its provisions do not apply where inmates have been diagnosed with behavioral or mental health conditions which cannot be treated within the Territory. There is no specific reference here to physical health issues – but OTPD believes that the Bill would benefit from that specific reference. Our office has clients whose serious medical conditions have necessitated transfers to off-island correctional facilities that can offer specialized care. We would see the bill as more complete if physical health requirements – like mental health requirements – was an exception to the new inmate transfer provisions.⁵

None of this is to say that we can prevent the next case like N’Kosi Parris. What we can do, however, is focus our best efforts and best thinking to address what we can. This bill is a step in the right direction. I thank the Committee for its effort on these important issues, as well as the opportunity to provide input as to these matters on behalf of the Office of the Territorial Public Defender.

⁵ There is a separate provision of the Code which provides that, “[a]n inmate may be taken, when necessary, to a medical facility outside the institution,” but this does not specifically refer to the transfer of inmates outside of the Territory. See 5 V.I.C. § 4508.