

**Virgin Islands Bureau of Corrections Director Wynnie Testamark Testimony**  
**Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications**

**February 11, 2026**

Good morning, Chairman Marvin A. Blyden, Vice-Chairman Clifford A. Joseph, Sr. esteemed Members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, Senator DeGraff, Senator Fonseca, Senator James, and Senator Joseph, distinguished Members of the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, legislative staff, and all those joining us in person and virtually via YouTube and Facebook.

My name is Wynnie Testamark, and I have the honor and privilege of serving as the Director of the Virgin Islands Bureau of Corrections. I appear before you today grounded in accountability, guided by data, and driven by a singular purpose: strengthening public safety while building a correctional system that does not end at confinement, but one that responsibly prepares individuals to return to our communities better equipped than when they entered.

Corrections is often viewed only through the lens of custody and control. But the reality is broader and more consequential. The decisions made inside our facilities directly shape the safety of our neighborhoods, the stability of our families, and the long-term demands placed on our public systems. When re-entry is done well, recidivism declines, communities stabilize, and government resources are used more effectively. When gaps exist, the cycle of incarceration, homelessness, untreated illness, and unemployment continues at great human and fiscal cost. Today's testimony is therefore not simply a discussion. It is a call to view re-entry as a shared public safety responsibility; one that requires coordination, investment, and legislative partnership.

Before I proceed, allow me to recognize the leadership team that stands with me, whose daily work sustains the Bureau's operations and advances our reform efforts:

- Peter Abrahams, Assistant Director of Support Services
- Dr. Linda Callwood, Medical Director
- Dr. Kyza A. Callwood, Chief Strategy Officer, and Acting Public Information Officer

**Question #1: Reentry Planning and Interagency Coordination**

The Virgin Islands Bureau of Corrections recognizes that reentry planning is essential to public safety, community stability, and responsible governance. Individuals returning from incarceration often face serious challenges, including housing instability, limited access to healthcare, unemployment, and unmet behavioral health needs. When these issues go unaddressed, the risk of recidivism increases, and public systems are further strained.

For this reason, the Bureau has made reentry planning a core correctional function. Reentry begins at intake and continues through release. It is structured, individualized, and case managed, with a focus on

identifying and addressing barriers before an individual return to the community. This approach reduces repeated incarceration and supports safer communities across the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Coordination upon release is critical. BOC works closely with the Departments of Human Services, Labor, and Health to ensure continuity of care. This collaboration supports access to healthcare, behavioral health services, public benefits, disability services, and employment opportunities. Pre-release planning and referrals help ensure individuals do not leave custody without connections to essential supports. The Bureau has also formalized its partnership with the Department of Labor through a Memorandum of Agreement.

Housing stability remains one of the most significant challenges to successful reentry. BOC collaborates with families, nonprofit and community-based providers, the Interagency Council on Homelessness, and the Continuum of Care to reduce releases into unhoused situations. While we work to connect individuals to available housing options, limited local housing inventory remains a major constraint.

Community partnerships are central to our efforts. Through the Virgin Islands Reentry Action Group, coordinated with the University of the Virgin Islands, government agencies and community organizations align education, workforce development, and wraparound services to support returning citizens.

Reentry planning is not solely a correctional responsibility. It is a public safety and community investment strategy. Through coordinated action, the Bureau of Corrections is working to strengthen families, reduce recidivism, and build safer communities throughout the Territory.

#### **Question #2: BOC Policies and Practices Related to Release of Individuals Without Stable Housing**

The Virgin Islands Bureau of Corrections addresses housing needs as part of its pre-release reentry planning process. Prior to release, individuals are screened for housing stability. When stable housing is not available, the Bureau makes referrals to the Continuum of Care and nonprofit service providers, and we also engage inmate families to identify potential housing support.

It is important to clarify that the Bureau of Corrections does not operate or control housing resources. We rely on community partners, family connections, and existing service systems to support individuals who lack housing upon release.

The Bureau continues to face significant challenges in securing transitional or permanent housing placements. These challenges include limited affordable and supportive housing inventory in the Territory, capacity constraints within shelter and housing programs, eligibility restrictions related to criminal history or supervision status, misalignment between housing availability and release dates, and high demand across the broader community.

#### **Question #3: Data and Observations on Repeated Justice System Involvement Linked to Unhoused, Mental Illness, and substance use disorders.**

As a result, some individuals are released with temporary or informal housing arrangements, or with referrals to housing and outreach services rather than confirmed placements. This underscores the need for expanded housing resources and continued interagency collaboration.

Housing stability is critical to successful reentry, reduced recidivism, and public safety. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated action across government, housing systems, and community partners.

While the U.S. Virgin Islands does not yet have a fully integrated dataset connecting homelessness, behavioral health, and recidivism, available territorial data and service-provider testimony reflect patterns consistent with national trends.

Recent Point-in-Time counts identify approximately 300 to 318 individuals experiencing homelessness Territory-wide, with many unsheltered and shelters operating at or beyond capacity. Providers emphasize that these figures undercount “hidden homelessness,” including individuals cycling between incarceration, temporary placements, hospitals, and informal housing.

Behavioral health service capacity in the Territory remains limited relative to need. Ongoing staffing shortages and constrained residential treatment capacity, including the need for occasional off-island placement, limit continuity of care. Territorial and federal reporting further indicates that justice involvement and homelessness are common among individuals receiving mental health services.

The Territory currently lacks dedicated transitional housing for justice-involved individuals and has very limited permanent supportive housing. As a result, individuals with untreated mental health or substance use disorders are often released without stable housing or adequate treatment connections. These gaps contribute to repeated law enforcement contact, short jail stays, and ongoing system cycling.

Repeated incarceration is often driven not solely by criminal behavior, but by unmet housing and behavioral health needs. Addressing this cycle requires coordinated housing stabilization, treatment capacity, and reentry planning that extends beyond release.

#### **Question #4: Existing and Planned BOC Programs and Practices Supporting Pre-Release Reentry**

The Virgin Islands Bureau of Corrections addresses education and vocational preparation, employment planning, housing readiness, behavioral health needs, and benefits access as core components of its pre-release reentry planning process.

Individuals are screened at intake and again prior to release for mental health and substance use needs. When services are available, the Bureau coordinates treatment through the Department of Health and community-based providers to support continuity of care.

Prior to release, BOC identifies individual needs and makes referrals to key partner agencies, including the Department of Labor for job placement and workforce services, the Department of Health for behavioral health services, the Department of Human Services for public benefits, the Continuum of

Care for housing referrals, and nonprofit providers for reentry support. The Bureau also supports referrals for essential public benefits such as healthcare and nutrition assistance. It is important to note that the Bureau of Corrections does not operate housing programs or benefits enrollment directly. We rely on external partners and existing service systems to connect individuals to these supports.

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. Limited housing inventory constrained behavioral health capacity, and the absence of dedicated transitional housing for justice-involved individuals often limit the availability of stable placements and services at the time of release.

Addressing these gaps is critical to successful reentry, reduced recidivism, and public safety, and will require continued interagency coordination and expanded community resources.

**Question #5: Any operational, statutory, or funding barriers that impact the Bureau's ability to support successful reentry and prevent homelessness-driven recidivism, along with recommendations for legislative or interagency action.**

Without targeted statutory authority, sustained funding, and expanded housing and behavioral health capacity, the Bureau of Corrections remains limited in its ability to prevent releases into being unhoused and interrupt the cycle of re-incarceration. Reentry cannot remain solely a referral-based process. Legislative and interagency action is needed to shift reentry toward a coordinated, prevention-oriented system that improves public safety and community stability across the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Key actions include establishing dedicated reentry authority and funding within the Bureau, expanding transitional and permanent supportive housing for justice-involved individuals, and strengthening in-Territory behavioral health and substance use treatment capacity. Additionally, authorizing prerelease enrollment in Medicaid, SNAP, and other benefits would reduce service gaps at release. Formalizing interagency governance through shared planning, memoranda of understanding, and data sharing is also essential.

Together, these steps would allow reentry to function as a true public safety investment rather than a last-minute response.

## **Conclusion**

Chairman Blyden, Vice-Chairman Joseph, Sr., and distinguished Members of the 36th Legislature; as I close, I return to the central truth that underpins today's testimony: every release is a public safety decision.

When individuals leave our custody without housing, without treatment, without employment pathways, and without coordinated support, the risks do not remain within correctional walls, they shift to our neighborhoods, our healthcare systems, our law enforcement officers, and ultimately to the taxpayers of this Territory. But when re-entry is structured, resourced, and collaborative, the outcome changes. Recidivism declines. Families stabilize. Communities become safer. Government operates more

efficiently. Re-entry, when done correctly, is not an expense, it a public safety investment that prevents far greater downstream costs.

The Bureau of Corrections has taken meaningful steps within its current authority. Yet systemic gaps remain that we cannot close alone. For that reason, we respectfully put forward several priority actions for legislative partnership:

- First, we ask for statutory authority and dedicated, recurring funding to establish a formal Re-entry Services Unit within the Bureau. This would allow specialized staff to coordinate housing navigation, behavioral health services, interagency case planning, and benefits enrollment prior to release.
- Second, we request targeted appropriations to expand transitional and permanent supportive housing for justice-involved individuals, in coordination with the Continuum of Care and the Interagency Council on Homelessness. Without dedicated housing options, individuals continue to exit custody without stable placements.
- Third, we ask for increased investment in in-Territory behavioral health and substance use treatment capacity, including step-down services, to reduce reliance on incarceration as a default response to untreated conditions.
- Finally, we request statutory authorization for prerelease enrollment in Medicaid, SNAP, and other benefits, along with direction to formalize interagency agreements, shared planning timelines, and data sharing across Corrections, Health, Human Services, Labor, and housing partners.

Together, these actions would allow re-entry to move from a referral-based process to a coordinated, prevention-oriented public safety investment.

We can continue allocating resources to manage the consequences of instability, or we can make deliberate investments in the systems and supports that create lasting stability and safer communities. The Bureau of Corrections stands ready to work alongside this Legislature, our agency partners, and community stakeholders to build a reentry framework worthy of the people we serve and protective of the communities we all call home.

Thank you for your leadership, your oversight, and your commitment to public safety across the U.S. Virgin Islands. I am prepared to answer any questions the Committee may have.