

**THIRTY-SIXTH LEGISLATURE OF THE  
U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS  
COMMITTEE ON HOUSING,  
TRANSPORTATION &  
TELECOMMUNICATIONS**

**Chairman: The Honorable Marvin A. Blyden.**

**Virgin Islands Police Department**

**St. Thomas, USVI**

**February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2026**

Good morning to the Chair, The Honorable Marvin A. Blyden, Legislative body and Staff, Members of the VIPD Team, and to the listening and viewing audience. Good morning, I am Deborah Hodge, Chief of Police for the St. Thomas-St. John District of the Virgin Islands Police Department and I am honored to come before you today on behalf of Commissioner Mario Brooks and the U.S. Virgin Islands Police Department.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide testimony on behalf of the Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD) regarding homelessness in our territory and the role of law enforcement in addressing this complex and growing challenge.

The Virgin Islands Police Department is the frontline public safety agency in the United States Virgin Islands. Our officers serve as first responders not only to crime, but also to social crises that increasingly intersect with public safety, including homelessness, mental health emergencies, substance use disorders, and quality-of-life concerns. VIPD is also a participating member of the Virgin Islands Interagency Council on Homelessness, and we recognize that homelessness is not solely a law enforcement issue, but a humanitarian, public health, and housing issue that requires coordinated, territory-wide solutions.

### **Role of VIPD in Addressing Homelessness**

VIPD officers routinely encounter unsheltered individuals in the course of their daily duties. These encounters occur during calls for service related to welfare checks, disturbances, trespassing complaints, public intoxication, domestic disputes, medical emergencies, and mental health crises. Officers are often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing homelessness, particularly those who are in distress, vulnerable to victimization, or in crisis.

The frequency of these encounters has increased in recent years. Officers report repeated interactions with the same individuals due to the lack of available shelter beds, limited behavioral health resources, and the absence

of long-term housing options. Many calls are not criminal in nature but are instead rooted in unmet social and health needs. This places law enforcement in the difficult position of balancing compassion, constitutional protection, and the need to maintain public safety and order.

### **Trends and Challenges**

Notably, women with children now represent a growing segment of the homeless population, signaling an urgent need for family-oriented emergency and supportive housing solutions.

Many individuals and families are temporarily staying with friends or relatives and therefore are not captured in formal counts. From a public safety perspective, housing instability increases vulnerability to crime, exploitation, health emergencies, and victimization, particularly for women, children, seniors, and individuals with disabilities.

### **Training and Officer Preparedness**

VIPD recognizes that effective responses to homelessness require more than enforcement. Our officers receive training in areas directly relevant to these encounters, including crisis intervention, mental health awareness,

substance use disorders, and trauma-informed policing principles. This training emphasizes de-escalation, communication, respect for individual rights, and appropriate referrals to social service providers whenever possible.

Officers are trained to distinguish between criminal behavior and behavior stemming from mental illness, trauma, or housing instability. When enforcement action is necessary to address immediate safety concerns, it is carried out in accordance with constitutional protections and departmental policy. When enforcement is not appropriate, officers strive to engage in outreach, provide information on available resources, and coordinate with partner agencies.

### **Collaboration and Interagency Coordination**

Addressing homelessness in the U.S. Virgin Islands requires strong collaboration between VIPD, the Department of Human Services (DHS), healthcare providers, and community-based organizations. While VIPD's primary responsibility is to ensure community safety, DHS and its partners are best positioned to provide housing assistance, case management, behavioral health services, and emergency support.

Strengthening cross-agency collaboration is essential to expanding

shelter capacity, improving outreach to unsheltered individuals, and reducing repeat police contacts. Enhanced coordination can also help ensure that officers have real-time referral options when encountering individuals in need, rather than being left with limited or ineffective alternatives.

## **Closing**

In closing, the Virgin Islands Police Department remains committed to safeguarding the rights, dignity, and safety of all residents, including those experiencing homelessness. Our mission emphasizes crime prevention, community partnerships, and constitutional policing, and we recognize that long-term solutions to homelessness lie in housing, services, and coordinated policy—not enforcement alone.

We stand ready to continue working with the Legislature, the Committee on Housing, Transportation & Telecommunications, the Department of Human Services, and our community partners to develop comprehensive, humane, and effective responses to homelessness in the territory. By strengthening collaboration and expanding housing and support services, we can reduce risks to vulnerable individuals, improve quality of life in our communities, and allow law enforcement to focus on its core public safety mission.

Thank you for your attention and for your continued commitment to addressing this critical issue. I am prepared to answer any questions the Committee may have.