

Testimony for the Rules & Judiciary Committee

Melanie L. Turnbull – Judicial Nominee to the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands – Family Division

Good morning, Madam Chair, honorable members of the Rules and Judiciary Committee, family, friends, colleagues, and most importantly my two sons, Mosie and Judah. I am deeply honored to appear before you as a nominee for Judge of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands, Family Division. First, I thank God for his faithfulness in bringing me to this moment. I must also express my gratitude to the Governor, The Honorable Albert Bryan, Jr. and Lieutenant Governor, The Honorable Tregenza Roach, for their confidence in nominating me. Finally, I thank this Committee for the opportunity to present my journey, my qualifications, and my commitment to the people of the Virgin Islands.

I am Melanie Lark Turnbull, a descendent of working-class grandparents, most of whom had no formal education beyond primary school. However, their faith, tenacity, and unwavering determination to succeed provided sturdy shoulders upon which my parents climbed, and I now firmly stand. The union of my parents, Brian and Karen Turnbull, instilled in my siblings and I the value of hard work and service to others above self. I began my educational journey here in St. Thomas at Wesleyan Academy, where I attended from kindergarten through the eighth grade. I then attended and graduated from Charlotte Amalie High School in 2002. After graduation, I attended Hampton University—my parents' alma mater—and earned my Bachelor of Science degree in Biology, graduating cum laude in 2006. At the time, I had no way of knowing that my path would ultimately lead me to the legal profession. In fact, my journey to law school was anything but traditional. Before entering law school, I worked several non-legal jobs—jobs that to

the unkeen eye would seem insignificant to my profession, yet each of these jobs taught me something vital about people, humility, and responsibility. I worked as an HIV laboratory technician, a waitress, a summer camp counselor, and an administrative assistant, all before taking my first course as a law student. These experiences allowed me to enter law school with a mature and grounded perspective that shaped the advocate and person I would become—a woman with grit, unrelenting work ethic, and disciplined reasoning.

After enrolling in the Norman Adrian Wiggins School of Law at Campbell University in 2010, I immersed myself in trial advocacy. As a third-year law student, my Mock Trial teammates and I won the Regional Championship in the 38th National Trial Competition. My dedication to serving others guided my law school career. I was honored to serve as Secretary of the Student Bar Association, a staff writer for the Campbell Law Observer, and the student representative on the Dean Search Committee. As an intern at the North Carolina Supreme Court, I witnessed public service in action and drafted bench briefs, reviewed petitions for discretionary review, and assisted in both criminal and civil petitions. These roles and experiences enhanced my communication skills, collaborative abilities, and commitment to objective and ethical decision-making. Upon graduating, I was selected as a member of the Order of Barristers, a national honorary society reserved for the top advocates in the country. Due to my command of the rules of evidence, courtroom skill, and excellence in advocacy, I earned recognition as a litigant to watch.

Drawing from the skills and experiences I obtained during law school, I began my legal career with the honor of returning home to serve as an Appellate Law Clerk to the Honorable Associate Justice Ive A. Swan of the Supreme Court of the Virgin Islands. As Justice Swan's Law Clerk, I drafted pre-argument memoranda, researched complex legal issues, attended oral arguments, and helped ensure the clarity and consistency of Virgin Islands jurisprudence. Those

who know Justice Swan, know that his name is synonymous with scrupulousness, staunch independence, and unparalleled wisdom—all characteristics I have aspired to embody from the moment Justice Swan gave me the opportunity to be trained by and learn from him. My clerkships taught me the bedrock principles of judicial service, including the importance of neutrality, the discipline of careful, objective legal analysis, and the necessity of treating every party with respect.

After my clerkship, I served the people of the Virgin Islands as a public defender, first locally and later federally. I joined the Office of the Territorial Public Defender in fall 2015, starting with misdemeanor matters in the Magistrate Division. Five months later, I was promoted to a felony docket, where I managed a full caseload involving offenses such as robbery, firearms violations, and homicides. During my tenure as an Assistant Territorial Public Defender, I handled cases from the probable cause hearing through trial and sentencing. I drafted motions, conducted investigations, and developed fact-specific case theories. I practiced client-centered advocacy, by ensuring clients understood their rights and responsibilities while their cases were pending in the Superior Court. In addition to my felony docket, I had the opportunity to handle juvenile matters in the Family Division, including advice of rights, detention hearings, consent decree discussions, and adjudication hearings.

Since 2018, I have served as an Assistant Federal Public Defender for the District of the Virgin Islands, representing indigent clients. As an Assistant Federal Public Defender, I gained extensive litigation experience conducting suppression hearings, jury trials, and contested sentencings. In 2019, I also had the privilege to argue before a panel of the Third Circuit Court of Appeals. The role of an assistant federal public defender demanded effective legal research, meticulous writing, and strategic case management. It also required balancing zealous advocacy while fostering delicate relationships with the Office of Probation, the U.S. Marshal's Service, the

Clerk's Office and the United States Attorney's Office. Beyond presenting cases in court, I have served in several volunteer capacities within the judicial branch. I participated in Kids Court under the leadership of then District Court Judge Curtis Gomez. Kids Court was an interactive educational program designed to expose Virgin Islands students to the many roles within the court system. I served as a member of both the Magistrate Merit Selection Panel and the Chief Probation Officer Selection Panel. And recently, I helped craft proposed Local Rules for the District Court of the Virgin Islands as a member of the Advisory Committee for Rules. Finally, this year I served as a panelist at the 2025 Annual District Court conference.

Service to both the legal and broader community has always been a core part of my identity. Here in the Virgin Islands, I have contributed through a range of civic initiatives. I am honored to serve as a special advisor to the Virgin Islands Justice Initiative, which is dedicated to expanding access to justice across our community. My passion for youth development led me to be a former Moot Court coach for the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School, where I mentored aspiring advocates from the Virgin Islands for several years. And since 2018, I have been a proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated—the first Greek-lettered sorority established by and for African-American college women. Upholding its legacy of sisterhood and "service to all mankind" deeply informs my commitment to public service. I am also engaged in board leadership and governance, with over five years of service on the Board of the Office of the Territorial Public Defender. My other board roles include being a former officer of the All Saints Cathedral School Board, and I am the current Interim President of the Faith Alive Christian Academy School Board. These aforementioned roles have provided me with a broader understanding of the challenges families face educationally, socially, and economically. As such, these roles have only reinforced my belief that the law must be applied impartially, fairly, and humanely.

If confirmed by this Committee and the full body, I will bring the following to the Family Division: fairness and impartial judgment, empathy for children and families in crisis, firmness to ensure safety and accountability, patience, timely and orderly administration of justice, and respect for the gravity of matters affecting community members during some of their most vulnerable moments. The Family Division is a unique and demanding assignment, requiring a judge who can maintain objectivity, navigate conflict, and issue decisions that prioritize the well-being of children and other members in need in our society. My personal and professional journey spanning clerking, public defense, and community service has prepared me for that responsibility.

Thirteen years ago, a summer internship at the Office of the Territorial Public Defender served as the catalyst for my journey to practicing law in the Virgin Islands. Hoping to secure an internship, I emailed the Chief Territorial Public Defender, who, without hesitation invited me to join the office for an unpaid summer position after my second year of law school. That internship offered invaluable attorney mentorship, supervised client interactions, and hands-on trial experience. The experience ultimately changed the trajectory of my life and solidified my dedication to representing the underserved. The Honorable Debra Watlington, then the Chief Territorial Public Defender and, until recently the Superior Court Judge in the Family Division extended that opportunity. Her leadership and example shaped my understanding of what it means to practice law with integrity, compassion, and service at its center. My nomination to fill the vacancy created by Judge Watlington's retirement represents a full-circle moment that honors the Virgin Islands' spirit of paving the way for others to follow. It would be an incredible honor to succeed Judge Watlington as the Judge of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands, Family Division, where I would strive to serve our community and inspire those who will follow.

Members of the Committee, I stand before you as a daughter of the Virgin Islands, shaped by this community and committed to serving it with integrity, humility, and unwavering dedication. I am grateful for the opportunity to be considered, and I welcome your questions.

Thank you.