

Access to Racial and Cultural Health Institute, Inc.

“Linking Communities to Resources for Health Equity”



Testimony of Access to Racial & Cultural Health Institute in support of Bill No 36-0105, an act amending title 7 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 13, subchapter III by prohibiting the possession, sale, or manufacture of tetrahydrocannabinol acid, delta-6 THC, delta-8 THC and delta-10 THC products in the Virgin Islands and for other related purposes. Duane Howell, Executive Director.

Good morning Honorable Senator Carla J. Joseph, members of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. My name is Duane Howell, I am the Executive Director of Access to Racial and Cultural Health Institute, Inc., or ARCH Institute a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization operating in its 22nd While our office is based on St. Croix but working across the territory to address emerging public health threats among adolescents. We are also working closely with Facing it Together in the Virgin Islands, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded by youth leaders

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who will become a critical partner in the prevention continuum to address threats on St. Thomas and St. John.

As in my previous testimony to the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety I am in support of the bill generally. Marijuana impact on high school-age students across the territory is significant. 13% of high school students report current use of marijuana, as measured by the 2025 Core Measures survey. Nearly 31% of high school students have a friend that has used marijuana at least once. At least one in four high school students can access marijuana products relatively easy. Also at least one in every high school student uses synthetic marijuana. There has been testimony on the impact physiological impact of marijuana on the growing body. The risky behaviors associated with marijuana use are more concerning and have negative implications for our adolescent community and their future.

When Virgin Islands Department of Education Incident Report is analyzed, it is noted drug related incidents have been reported at an exponential rate each school year. This makes sense as high school-age students report relatively easy of accessing marijuana products, whether through family and friends, or by commercial means. 16% of parents believe there is no harm in their child using marijuana. 52.4% of teen peers believe there is no harm in their friends using marijuana. An increased evidence-based prevention and intervention programs and projects needs to be integrated into school communities across the territory including supportive services for students who have received out of school suspension for use on campus. These

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services must span over the course of the school year. What I cannot support is whole school, mass assemblies, lecture series as these are not effective in creating change. In 2022, there was an edibles taskforce formed, which excluded prevention CBOs doing the work, but the taskforce quickly dissipated because it was reactionary, with no money was earmarked to address the issues through a sustained evidence-informed public health approach. These problems cannot be solved with enforcement, it requires the integration of sound, sustained evidence-informed public health strategies over a long-term period. It means this body must invest into the public health prevention infrastructure.

Merchant education is lacking, merchant ethics is lacking, merchant humanity and sense of being part of raising the village is also lacking. During September 2025, Facing it Together in the Virgin Islands conducted environmental scans on underage tobacco and marijuana sales. 100% of the merchants in the St. Thomas/ St. John where the scans were conducted were out of compliance. This is not surprising; the FDA has been doing compliance checks across the territory since Tobacco 21 law was enacted. Compliance checks are conducted multiple times throughout the year. Territorial merchants are constantly out of compliance. The reports are public on FDA's website.

We continue to support the intent of Bill 36-0105 especially in restricting access to our youth population. The amended bill still does not address community education strategies; merchant education, capacity building among community, and evidence-informed prevention and intervention programs for youth. The bill also does not address e-commerce sales of these

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products as well so while the bill will take these products off the physical storefront shelves, it does nothing to restrict access to the virtual store front, where there is greater variation of products and recognizing the federal farm bill does not have age restrict to sales.

Looking at the current climate, federal prevention dollars are or really have gone away. This is very real. ARCH Institute can testify to these dollars suddenly being non-existent. Local governments will need to support the work community-based organizations do to augment public health services. In my previous testimony, I spoke about the need to fund prevention. The amended bill still does not address investing into the prevention continuum and specifically investing in community-based evidence-informed prevention to increase protective factors, increase perception of risk, decrease use among adolescents, and implement effective, evidence-informed population specific programs across junior and senior high schools.

In subsection 209 of the proposed legislation, it directs 50% of fines collected to the Agriculture Revolving Fund and 50% to the Consumer Protection Fund. While I agree with the latter, I will plead again for consideration to amend the legislation to redirect the former to a fund which supports community-based evidence-informed substance abuse prevention initiatives. The Consumer Protection Fund is important to support merchant education and to conduct shoulder tap programs ensuring merchants remain in compliance with the law.

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Bill 36-0105 will only address restricting access in physical store fronts, it does not address other critical components such as merchant education requirements for licensure, and evidence-informed prevention implementation among school-age population in particular.

ARCH Institute and Facing it Together in the Virgin Islands believes there is value in Bill No. 36-0105 being enacted. Collectively, we will continue to deploy sound evidence-informed environmental strategies to curtail use and increase protective factors within the confines of our limited funding. While we support this measure, we ask the sponsors and committee to consider identifying funds to support evidence-informed prevention programs and projects, amend where the penalties are being directed and to take into consideration e-commerce access.

I am ready to engage with the committee on the work we are doing to increase protective factors and curtail use.

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