



TESTIMONY OF  
DR. SAFIYA GEORGE, PRESIDENT  
UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON RULES AND JUDICIARY  
THIRTY-SIXTH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

FRITZ E. LAWAEZ LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE ROOM  
ST. CROIX  
U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

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## INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Senator Carla Joseph, Chair of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, members of the Committee, other members of the Thirty-Sixth Legislature present, other testifiers, members of the press, persons in the viewing and listening audiences, ladies, and gentlemen. My name is Dr. Safiya George, and I have the privilege of serving as President of the University of the Virgin Islands. It is an honor to appear before this distinguished body.

As a proud native of the Virgin Islands, I am honored to be here today, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to be considered for service on the Virgin Islands Government Hospitals and Health Facilities Corporation Board of Directors. I appreciate the confidence placed in me through this nomination and welcome the opportunity to contribute to the vital work of strengthening healthcare governance in our Territory.

As President of the University of the Virgin Islands, I have dedicated my career to courageous caring leadership, scientific research, and transformation in healthcare. I believe that strong, strategic leadership and collaboration are essential to improving healthcare access, quality, and sustainability in our community. Throughout my nearly 30-year career in healthcare, I have remained committed to improving patient outcomes, advancing healthcare education, and strengthening the connection between healthcare institutions and the communities they serve. My journey began in 1997 as a nurse at Seaview Nursing Home and Rehabilitation Center, followed by years of clinical experience at the Governor Juan F. Luis Medical Center and multiple leading healthcare institutions, including Johns Hopkins University Hospital, Grady Memorial Hospital, Northside Hospital, and Piedmont Medical Center in Atlanta. In addition, my early training as a nursing student at the University of the Virgin Islands provided me with hands-on experience at Schneider Regional Medical Center and outpatient clinics on St. Croix.

Beyond direct patient care, I have dedicated nearly 20 years to higher education, focusing on healthcare education and workforce development. I have served on numerous healthcare boards, including an international board representing 30,000 nurses globally, where I was an active leader for a decade. My service also includes organizations such as Boca Helping Hands, which addresses food security, job training, and healthcare access including primary care and behavioral health services in Palm Beach County, Florida. Additionally, as Chair of the Florida Association of Colleges of Nursing, I was part of the leadership team that successfully advocated for legislative support to expand nursing education and strengthen partnerships between universities and healthcare institutions across the state.

As a health scientist, I have authored over 50 peer-reviewed journal articles and contributed to multiple book chapters. My research has focused on critical public health issues, including HIV/AIDS outcomes, sexually transmitted infections, and risk behaviors. I have also leveraged data science and machine learning to develop predictive models for COVID-19 outcomes such as mortality risk, ICU admissions, hospital length of stay, and ventilator use as well as models for predicting Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.

The Virgin Islands continues to face serious health challenges that affect our families and communities. Heart disease, cancer, homicide, and unintentional injuries remain the leading causes of death, and homicides in particular account for far too many years of life lost. Although life expectancy in the U.S. Virgin Islands has risen to nearly 79 years, the absence of updated published figures locally reminds us of the

need to invest in reliable health data. For context, in 2023 the average life expectancy in the U.S. was 78.4 years—about four years shorter than the 82.5-year average of other developed nations. This widening gap underscores the importance of improving local outcomes and aligning with global health standards.

Data from our community health centers further illustrate areas of concern. The St. Thomas East End Medical Center and Frederiksted Health Care, Inc. on St. Croix report persistently low screening rates for key conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancer—below ideal targets for preventive health.

Health Centers	Observations & Trends
East End Medical Center (St. Thomas)	Hypertension is highly prevalent—over 50% of community members are affected, leading to increased risk of stroke, heart disease, kidney failure, and amputations. Diabetes and hypertension screenings remain lower than desired, despite outreach efforts.
Frederiksted Health Care, Inc. (St. Croix)	Serves nearly 9,500 unique individuals per year with chronic conditions like hypertension, diabetes, and asthma; however, screening and follow-up rates have not improved in recent years.

On the workforce side, shortages are putting a strain on our healthcare system. A 2024 national report found that the Virgin Islands has one of the lowest number of primary care physicians per capita in the country, and we do not yet have a medical school or residency program to grow our own pipeline. Federal data confirms this shortage: St. Thomas is designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) across all three critical categories—primary care, dental, and mental health—with “high-needs” scores of 12, 16, and 13, respectively. St. Thomas also remains formally recognized as a Medically Underserved Area (MUA), highlighting how difficult it is for residents to access even basic care.

Nursing shortages continue to be a pressing concern, driven by high turnover, non-competitive salaries, and difficult working environments that include (infrastructure issues, lack of supplies, and even water and HVAC challenges). The recent water contamination crisis on St. Croix—leading to emergency lead-screening clinics at both St. Thomas East End Medical Center and Frederiksted Health Care—revealed how fragile our systems can be in the face of acute public health threats. Taken together, these challenges show how essential it is to strengthen our workforce, support our nurses and physicians, and invest in preventive screening and healthcare infrastructure to meet the needs of our people.

Besides my PhD in Nursing Research, I have several certifications and nationally recognized credentials in the healthcare industry. I have an Advanced Practice Registered Nurse-Board Certification; I’m a Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing (a prestigious honor recognizing individuals for their outstanding contributions to the nursing profession); and I’m a Fellow of the National Academies of Practice (an honor recognizing outstanding interdisciplinary contributions to healthcare).

With this breadth and depth of experience in both healthcare and education, I am eager to bring my expertise to the Virgin Islands Government Hospitals and Health Facilities Corporation Board of Directors. I look forward to contributing to efforts that enhance healthcare access, quality, and innovation in the Virgin Islands.

Thank you for the opportunity to present before you today, and I welcome any questions you may have.