

BILL TO ESTABLISH THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OFFICE OF GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION MOVES FORWARD

Date : October 23, 2019

St.

Thomas- Members of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, Public Safety, and Veterans Affairs chaired by Sen. Steven Payne, Sr. convened in a meeting at the Capitol Building on Wednesday and voted favorably for Bill No. 33-0126- An Act amending Title 3, chapter 1 of the Virgin Islands Code by adding a new section 27i establishing the Virgin Islands Office of Gun Violence Prevention under the Office of the Governor. Lawmakers also voted and approved additional measures. All items approved will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

The

measure seeks to determine duties, objectives, and employee responsibilities for the Virgin Islands Office of Gun Violence and Prevention. The Office will also compile data on gun-related deaths and injuries reported by the Virgin Islands Police Department and the Department of Health and to release quarterly and annual reports. Sponsor of the bill, Sen. Myron Jackson said, "The bill is offered for the countless lives lost to gun violence in the Territory. In 2017, the Virgin Islands ranked high for violent deaths in the Caribbean. Those numbers placed our tiny islands at fourth in the world given stiff competition to countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, and Venezuela. This is a comprehensive approach to address the root cause of gun violence."

Trevor

Velinor, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD) expressed concerns with duplicating the Office of Gun Violence Prevention with existing crime prevention strategies and services offered by the VIPD, the VIPD Victim Witness Advocates, and the VIPD Crime Prevention Unit. Velinor recommended conducting a three-year assessment through the "sunset provision" to monitor the impact of the Office. Sen. Kenneth Gittens also indicated that the bill is redundant and that parental involvement with youths may curtail crime. "Gun prevention starts with proper parenting. It takes a village to raise a child and until we go back

to the basics, the world will change before our eyes.” Similarly, Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory noted that law enforcement agencies should collaborate to tackle gun violence in the Territory.

Moreover, the initial funding to establish the Office of Gun Violence Prevention will cost \$700,000. The monies will be appropriated from the General Fund of the Government Virgin Islands in the fiscal year ending on October 31, 2020, according to Section 2 of the bill. However, the Office of Management and Budget Director Jenifer O’Neal noted that \$700K is insufficient for initial operations that are inclusive of employee salaries, reporting, equipment, and outreach. Sen. Payne requested that OMB identify monies to fund this initiative because preventing gun violence will drastically reduce crimes in the Virgin Islands. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Report, there were 43 homicides in the Virgin Islands in 2018 and 31 as of October 2019.

Separately, senators voted and approved:

- Bill No. 33-0201-An Act amending title 20, part II, chapter 43, of the Virgin Islands Code by increasing the punishment for negligent homicide by means of a motor vehicle. The sponsor of the bill is Sen. Javan James.
- Bill No. 33-0106- An Act amending Title 6 of the Virgin Islands Code by adding a new chapter 11 prohibiting various uses of unmanned aircrafts. Proposed by Sen. Dwayne DeGraff.

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