Good morning Madame Chair, the Honorable Donna Frett-Gregory, the distinguished Legislators of the 34th Legislature of the US Virgin Islands, legislative staff, Members of my Executive Team, and to the listening and viewing audience. My name is Trevor A. Velinor, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Police Department. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the proposed legislation, “An Act amending Title 23, chapter 5, sections 460, 470, 471, and 489a of the Virgin Islands Code to provide for better licensing, safety, and declaration process for firearms ammunition entering and being used in the Virgin Islands by clarifying the following: reciprocity provisions and what out-of-state licensees need to do for licensure, the reporting and declaration requirements for firearms brought into the Virgin Islands, and safe storage requirements when traveling into the Territory by residents and visitors alike. This
The amendment provides for preventative measures aimed at regulating the influx of firearms and ammunition that traverse throughout our territory. Additionally, this amendment is a response to the essential need of ensuring proper measures for gun safety, relative to their storage. The legislation also provides guidance on the protocol for declaring firearms upon arrival to the Territory and the release of firearms upon departure. Furthermore, the bill identifies specific states for reciprocal recognition based upon the similar requirements of licensure. The amendments to the VI Code are necessary to assist VIPD in guiding our residents and visitors on firearm regulations.

As a result of these adjustments to the VI Code, we anticipate improved accountability for the movement of firearms throughout the territory. The improved accountability allows the Department to track those firearms, thereby, increasing the security of the territory. Such development provides for a specific process to be followed upon entry and prior to departure from the territory. We support measures that assist our public safety efforts. For the above referenced, VIPD stands in support of the bill
and understands the importance of enacting such measures to deter criminal activities in our Territory.

VIPD’s top priority is the safety of our community. As the Commissioner, I am keenly aware of the rights of our residents to bear arms. The regulations require that the Commissioner makes comprehensive assessments in determining and approving firearms licenses for home protection, for personal carry, for business protection, and for use in relation to security responsibilities.

The Department support the rights of legal gun ownership, consistent with the law. To possess a firearm in our Territory requires licensure. The overwhelming majority of firearms licensees take this responsibility serious, as reflected in the rear occurrence of their firearms being seized in crimes. A critical component in reducing gun crime includes having robust regulations and oversight. There are occasions when licensed firearms are lost or stolen due to negligence. In those cases, there are increased risks that stolen or lost firearms may be used to commit crimes. I support holding accountable those gun owners that have not
safeguarded their firearms with proper storage and handling. VIPD in collaboration with the Virgin Islands Port Authority Police recently opened a firearms substation at the Cyril E. King Airport. The substation for the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport will be completed next week. The goal is to create an environment where any firearm that is brought into these locations must be declared prior to leaving the airport. We are also implementing a 24-hour declaration requirement for individuals traveling into the Territory with firearms. Similar to the federal requirements of declaring a firearm with the carrier prior to boarding an aircraft, it is prudent for travelers to alert law enforcement that they are bringing firearms into our Territory prior to arrival. This can be done through a declaration process. The bill enables VIPD and VIPA to mobilize our limited manpower resources to address the enforcement needs at the airports and ports of entry. For declared firearms by guests entering the Territory, Officers will complete the exit process by returning the visitor’s firearms prior to their departure.

In calendar year 2020, VIPD Firearms Bureau received 1574 firearm applications, resulting in the issuance of 1303 firearm licenses. There
were 461 new licenses (STX 226 and STTJ 235) in addition to 842 renewals (STX 493 and STTJ 349).

Crimes involving illegal firearms have shown a decrease from the requested period of January 2021 to present (March 2021). Through March 2021, there were 12 homicides in the territory compared to 11 homicides for the same period in calendar year 2020. VIPD recorded 77 arrests for Part I Crimes for CY2021 compared to 79 arrests for the same period of CY2020, indicating an 3% decrease. A 46% decrease in robberies was reported in CY2021 compared to CY2020, with 14 and 26 incidents, respectively. In 2020, there were 49 homicides, 27 for the St. Croix District and 20 for St. Thomas and 2 in St. John with 21 arrests.

VITEMA 9-1-1 received 426 firearm complaints through April of CY2021: St. Croix with 194 – 45.5% and St. Thomas/ St. John district with 232 – 54.5%. In Calendar Year 2020 VIPD ceased 171 firearms, St. Croix-103, St. Thomas/St. John–68. Thus far, for calendar year 2021, our investigative efforts have resulted in (42) firearms recovered: St. Croix District (24) and St. Thomas/St. John District (18).
VIPD continues to make concerted efforts to remove crime guns from our neighborhoods. Moreover, we are proud to announce our partnership with ATF in the creation of a Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC), whose purpose is to trace all recovered firearms and investigate their paths to crime. The CGIC will also investigate the criminal possession and unlawful use of firearms. VIPD officers are currently in the background phase of the deputization vetting process and this partnership will encourage a greater federal and local collaboration.

The Virgin Islands will honor conceal carry licenses to persons licensed in states with similar licensing requirements as in the Virgin Islands and will recognize licenses for the following states: Tennessee, Massachusetts, Alaska, Arkansas, Arizona, Iowa, Indiana (if 21 years of age); Indiana age requirement is 18), Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota (if 21 years of age; South Dakota age requirement is 18), Virginia, and Wisconsin for a period of ninety (90) days. These requirements include having a comprehensive firearms licensing course, background investigation (to include fingerprint and photo), and the individual must be at least 21 years old.
The applicants, however, are still required to follow the Territory’s processes for formal recognition which includes the submission of an application and payment of a twenty-five ($25.00) dollar fee. Penalty for non-compliance is established in the Virgin Islands Code.

In conclusion, the Virgin Islands Police Department is in support of this Bill. We are open to your suggestions for amendments and have worked very hard to get to this point. We thank you for inviting us to testify on this measure—a much-needed deterrent to gun related crime in our Territory. My team and I standby to answer your questions.