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Honorable Javan E. James Chair of the Committee on Economic Development & Agriculture

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Good afternoon, Honorable Senator James and esteemed members of the 35th Legislature's Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture. I am Sommer Sibilly-Brown, Founder and Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, Inc. With me today in the legislative chambers are: Emily Graci, Director of Development & Communications; Nicole Pacheco, Americorp VISTA Volunteer Farmer Liaison and Outreach Coordinator; and Kaila Francis, Americorp Vista Volunteer Communications and Outreach Specialist. I am honored to be here today to provide testimony on the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, Inc. and the path forward for the Virgin Islands Agriculture Plan.

### **Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition**

Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, often referred to as VI Good Food or just Good Food, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening and building a thriving, equitable, and just food system in the US Virgin Islands. We seek to advance a food system that prioritizes health equity, economic justice, environmental justice, and the principles of circular economics. Our work is centered on ensuring there are opportunities for stewarding the land and growing viable farm/food-based businesses, and that nutritious culturally-relevant food is accessible and affordable to all Virgin Islanders.

Established in 2012, VI Good Food is a fiscally-sponsored project under the St. Croix Foundation for Community Development and is incorporated by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor through the Division of Corporations and TradeMarks. VI Good Food is composed of an Executive Director, who manages and executes all projects; a partially-contracted team of dedicated professionals and volunteers to support the work and development of the organization; a Coordinating Panel, which stewards the organization's growth and accountability; and a values-aligned support network of local, regional, national, and international individuals and partnering organizations.

Our work focuses on Building partnerships and markets to drive more local food production and reduce barriers, for every individual, in accessing good food while working for a more resilient food system in the US Virgin Islands ( Food Security). Our programs seek to ensure that the USVI residents understand their right to self-determination of food choices at home, in school, and in stores, to shift patterns of dependence on global supply chains. We believe that Virgin Islanders should determine the quality and variety of what buy and cook to eat. ( **Food**

**Sovereignty)** We work with producers and sister agencies to promote stewardship of healthy soil, air, waters, and farming practices for future generations of Virgin Islanders to enjoy and thrive. (**Food Sustainability**). The highest good we seek is Creating a food system that connects all sectors, that provides social benefits, contributes to economies, and enhances the environment. Restoring our environments to a higher or more worthy state; a food system that aligns the USVI with the United Nations' Sustainable Development goals. (**Stewardship + Regeneration**)

In our formative years, our primary focus was on data collection. Post Hurricanes Irma and Maria, we worked with the St. Croix Foundation, Federal Emergency Management Community Planning, and Iowa State University to complete a comprehensive food system assessment and a disaster preparedness checklist. **During that period, we learned the power of directly connecting with the food system actors who graciously shared their lived experiences and wisdom.** This informed our organization's understanding of the system's assets, barriers, and general dynamics. Throughout these interactions, we have harnessed data and completed several key snapshots and reports in the areas of Risk Management, Food System Resilience, Covid's impact on the food system, consumer values and behaviors, and hosted three convenings a year and two trainings: 1) local food leader training; and 2) community food system training. We have touched over 200 actors in the system to include farmers, ranchers, restaurants, grocers, bars, wholesalers, retailers, and government institutions, through mixed methods of farm-site visits and 1:1 interviews, focus groups, and training sessions. Through this process, we have learned that our food system's resilience and growth potential are directly impacted by the quality of relationships and trust within and across the system.

We are members of the St. Croix Foundation Nonprofit Consortium Environmental Sector and we have worked in partnership with the St. Croix Foundation post hurricanes Irma and Maria to design and implement the Farm Tienda Pilot Project. In addition, with sister organizations, St. Croix Environmental Association (SEA) and Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT), we hosted four community town hall sessions with the EPA, OSHA, and local agency representatives in regard to incidents at the refinery in order to ensure the safety of St. Croix's residents and natural resources. Our partnership will continue with projects later this year on soil health.

In addition, we have supported the development of the National Farm to School program in the Territory; enhanced farm-to-health resources at community health centers; hosted farm-to-table events; delivered education and outreach to the Territory's children on numerous agricultural and food system-related topics; and fundraise to directly support farmers with emergency funding.

### Current Projects

- the Virgin Islands Virtual Farmers Market
  - will be the first territory-wide online market that connects farmers to consumers and businesses and increases equitable access to local food and online sales and markets. Mobile app will be customized for farmers' needs; beta version of online market will launch in late 2023.

- Food Find VI
  - includes mapping the geo-location and production/ facility data of all farms and food-related businesses in the USVI. Data collection will be completed in 2023, thus enabling integration with VITEMA and disaster and emergency planning. (Aligns with Mandate 8 DATA, BENCHMARK, AND ANALYSIS RECOMMENDATIONS)
  
- Technical Assistance to Farmers through Resources for Resilient Farms
  - provides year-round, one-on-one technical assistance to farmers/producers in St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix to assist with applying for multiple available federal funding resources, build conservation awareness and practices, and increase the efficacy and impact of federal agriculture grant funding in the VI. (Alignment Mandate 7 EDUCATION AND TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS)
  
- Good Food Bucks
  - is a nutrition incentive program that allows consumers to purchase locally-grown healthy food and value-added products sold at local farmers markets, farm stands, Farm Tiendas, and community food events, which helps support behavioral changes to promote health equity and combat the alarming rate of non-communicable diseases in the VI.

Virgin Islands Food System Resilience Project with Iowa State

- This is the first of multiple priorities for resilience and will provide support for the Virgin Islands Food System Resilience priority for a farmer cooperative in the territory. The consultant will support this project through understanding the impacts from the first cooperative challenges and missteps, to convening meetings of farmers to repair harm from the first cooperative, identifying who will work on the team for creating a new cooperative business plan, and determining roles of partners for the cooperative. This group will also consider where this cooperative model fits within the existing TAG network in the Virgin Islands. Virgin Islands Good Food will work with the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach food systems team to evaluate the process used for repairing harm done from the first cooperative, and the success of creating a new cooperative business model. ( aligns with mandate 2 BUSINESS MODEL RECOMMENDATIONS)

As stated in my July 14th, 2022 testimony to the 34th Legislature Committee on Economic Development, it is my position that the passage and now funding of the VI Agriculture Plan will offer our territory's agriculture and food system the momentum needed to make significant gains towards the goal of food security. As this body, key partners, steward the vision of Act 8404 the plan forward it is critical that we continue to ask the question what is the future of food and the economic viability we are investing in now? Who are the actors best poised to lay seeds or enact that future? And what are the conditions that we need to create for success?

In my previous testimony, I stated that one such condition to ensure the success of the Establishment of a local Food and Farm Advisory Committee was skill, ability, and buy-in. In my experience, these characteristics will be comprised of a mixed member body over political appointees. Another condition for success is identifying stop-gap measures that offer direct support to the system now. Our food system and its actors have been impacted by Irma, Maria, Covid, Raining Oil, Tropical Storm Fiona, and Drought. Farmers are experiencing diminishing labor pools with higher demands for wages, inconsistent supply chains, and inflation on the cost of goods and services. The reality does not only do we import 97% of our food. We also import 97% of the inputs to grow the food. We need to ensure that we are attending to labor and supply chain issues as we build out and implement the plan.

Additional conditions that need to be prioritized is the execution of Mandate 1 A comprehensive regulatory component for the territories farming industry. I humbly ask this body to take decisive action on the review of the work done by the Agriculture Plan Taskforce on the repeal, amendment, and funding of existing laws to ensure that this work is built on fertile soil and that adequate structure, oversight, and funding be given to the executive branch to implement the laws so we can have maximum accountability.

The final condition is community partnerships and cooperative work. This plan can not be achieved if it is structured to function in silos. As mentioned in my July 14th testimony I think that there is an opportunity to work with grassroots organizations that have historically done this work through philanthropic efforts. In our work I have identified several organizations that are incredible partners; these organizations currently serve to fill the gaps in services to farmers and have the trust of the community and producers. Organizations like We Grow Food, Inc., Virgin Islands Farmers Alliance, Island Food Security, Farmers in Action and Vi Good Food are working tirelessly to support the development of a healthy Food System. Use us to your benefit. These organizations are strong and have built good relationships with local producers and national organizations with deep histories that support the work of our Farmers like SAAFON whose board president resides on St. Croix. Centering on key government institutions is critical but if it's our *only* strategy then it is short-sighted.

In closing Food Systems support communities,' increasing capacity across all sectors civic, public, and private is one way of honoring the work of those who have been holding the 2% line, which is key for building trust and making quick progress. Again thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.