



CORAL BAY COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Mail: 9901 Emmaus, St. John, VI 00830
8-1 Emmaus, St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
CBCC@CoralBayCommunityCouncil.org Phone 340-776-2099
www.CoralBayCommunityCouncil.org
- CBCC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization -
- CBCC is an equal opportunity provider and employer -

Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety

Testimony before COMMITTEE HEARING

Wednesday, January 31, 2024

St. John, US Virgin Islands

Good Afternoon, Honorable Chairman Kenneth Gittens and the Senators on the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety, and all others present. Thank you so much for inviting CBCC again to participate in this series of hearings related to Security, Justice, and Public Safety.

I am Dr. Monica Miller-Smith, the new Executive Director of the Coral Bay Community Council, known also as CBCC. The Coral Bay Community Council is a nonprofit organization established in 2003 by volunteer residents with the purpose of acting as a community advocate, government liaison, and trusted information and research source. As a watershed management association, CBCC seeks to address threats to water quality in Coral Bay and the subwatersheds that contribute to it.

Thank you for inviting CBCC to testify today about the St. John community's concerns for the safety of our residents and visitors. I would like to discuss a few topics.

Improved Communication Between Police and Community Members

Our organization participates in the St. John Citizen Integration Team (the CIT) a long-standing group that meets monthly with the island administrator, police, and justice officials to discuss safety concerns. Recently, St. John CIT held its meeting on Wednesday, January 17, 2024, at 5:30 PM at the St. John Rescue building and there not any representatives from the police department present.

Opportunities for open communication with the police are needed and valued by community members. These meetings provide a forum for residents, organizations, and business owners to establish ongoing conversations about safety concerns and issues. When police officials are not in attendance, they are unable to participate and contribute to the discussions. Also, there becomes a decline in communication and addressing community concerns. Citizens care about this forum and want to have the police present at the meetings.

Undocumented Immigrants

This was mentioned at the last hearing, and it continues to be a community concern. Since the last hearing, several residents and businesses have shared personal stories about interactions with undocumented immigrants.

Last week, I spent time visiting with community members. This individual has had 4 encounters with groups of undocumented immigrants at what she believes is a designated pick-up location. She expressed concern about being alone and feeling uncomfortable. Upon arriving at work on the morning of January 10th, there was a group of women, children, and men sitting at the picnic tables. The community member believes that they were Haitian, as one of the women asked her if she spoke French. They also asked for water, and she provided them with a few waters to share. Shortly after, a vehicle picked up the group. In a rush to get to the vehicle, one woman left a dress behind. During each occurrence, she did not know what to expect from the people or the vehicles that were retrieving the undocumented immigrants.

A Coral Bay resident that frequents Brown Bay Trail has also encountered undocumented immigrants on the trail and noticed discarded clothes on the trail. Based on observations, they are changing out of wet clothes and discarding them. Since her encounters with the groups, she no longer feels safe running the trail alone and other residents have also expressed concerns about the trash and clothes on the trail and feeling unsafe using it.

Another safety concern is that part of their journey to St. John often involves swimming in the ocean to get to shore at any time of the day, which can be extremely dangerous at night and during harsh weather conditions. Also, if the person is not a good swimmer, the journey could become fatal.

Traffic safety

Road lines and arrows are needed throughout St. John. They are needed to create proper separation of the road. On April 20th, a Coral Bay resident and her guests were leaving a restaurant. They were passing Ajax Peak Road right before the Columbo's stand and near where north shore road comes in. There are no lines on the center or sides of the road in that area. It was 9:15pm when a drunk driver came directly towards the car. She saw the driver coming towards her and at the last minute she swerved. The driver hit the front right corner of her car but ended up behind them.

Two out of four people in the car ended up at the clinic with chest pains and a cut on the leg. Both injuries were not serious...but the trauma left behind is long lasting. Also, it took the driver 7 months to get her car back and she still does not drive at night. The driver shared with me that the main issue was definitely being intoxicated but she also believed that road lines would have helped the person to stay on their side of the road.

Lines are also needed to help tourists navigate driving in an unfamiliar place. I recall when I moved to Nevis. I had to navigate the roads and driving on the left side of the road. I appreciated the occasional "Keep Left" sign and road lines. On St. John, our roads are narrow and windy, and tourists are driving cars they do not know on the "wrong" side of the road. The community member and others have reported seeing tourists drive on the center of the road and move left when there is an area with lines. They need as much help as they can... as do locals at night.

Increase In Resources and Opportunities For Youth

Several months ago, CBCC was contacted regarding a project that had a Climate Resiliency Workforce Development component. There was a focus on the creation, placement, and support for jobs that enhance climate resiliency in water resources. Unfortunately, we decided not to pursue the project due to this not being a huge career interest on St. John.

After passing on the project, I started to have conversations about the existence of youth programs that provided youth exposure to climate resilience, along with other science related fields. My research took me to the University of the Virgin Islands.

Last Friday, I met with Dr. Kim Waddell and Greg Guanell at the University, and we discussed STEM, climate resiliency, and marine biology educational resources and opportunities for Virgin Island youth. I learned more about the programs offered through the university and the presence of UVI on St. John. They shared information about the VI Education Resource Station. They talked about the programs and camps that once operated at the facility.

I shared with them my desire to offer STEM-related education programs and resources to St. John Youth. I believe that if you plant seeds early, then interest and a desire to learn more will begin to blossom.

CBCC is currently working on developing a Watershed Education Program. The focus of the program is to educate Virgin Islands youth on how the watershed they live in can impact them and be protected. To bring the program to fruition, we will be seeking support to assist us with delivering a successful program. My long-term goal is to see a shift in St. John youth pursuing college degrees and careers in science related fields, such as climate resiliency and marine biology, and that, in turn, they will invest in their community and help to preserve the natural resources and ecosystems within the Virgin Islands. Also, I hope that they create sustainable global models that can be replicated in other habitats that are like our territory.

Mental Health Disorders

This is a multifaceted issue that is complex. Personally, my family has navigated this issue a few times with family members, and it is a tough road to embark on with numerous barriers and hurdles. It is not a simple path and resources vary by community. However, when people are a danger to themselves or others, it is something that cannot be ignored.

Many Coral Bay Residents have shared their concern with a resident that is living at the Coral Bay Wastebin site. While I do not know the historical context of this person's life or how the individual ended up at the site, I do know that the individual is currently in possession of an air rifle, as I have seen the person pointing it at vehicles as people drive by. There have also been reports of the person having intense verbal interactions with people that stop at the dump to get rid of the trash and recycling.

Communities everywhere have people that have daily challenges with mental health. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, it is estimated that more than one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness (57.8 million people). It would be advantageous to the community if there were medical

resources available for all people that are struggling with mental health disorders. Speaking from experience; it is important that resources are available that provide continuous support to the person struggling with the disorder and the person's family. When mental health disorders go untreated, the issues are often exacerbated. As a community, we also need to make sure that we are increasing awareness about mental health and combatting negative perceptions about mental health disorders. It is a public health issue that can affect anyone.

Thank you again for the invitation to speak at the hearing and I look forward to potential future discussions about improvements.

Submitted by

Monica Miller-Smith, Ed.D.

Executive Director

Coral Bay Community Council