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Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation

Honorable Chairman Samuel Carrion

The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services

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Testimony to provide an overview of operations and status update on the Division of Children and Family Services and the Division of Intervention and Prevention Services within the Department of Human Services
Good Morning, Honorable Senator Samuel Carrion, Chairman of the Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks, and Recreation, members of the Committee, Senators of the 34th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, and to the listening and viewing audiences. I am Kimberley Causey-Gomez, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (DHS) and I am pleased to present testimony today that provides an overview of the operations and status update on the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Division of Intervention and Prevention Services (DIPS). Accompanying me is Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin, who has oversight of DCFS and DIPS and Ms. Shana Brathwaite, the Territorial Administrator of DIPS.

I will start first with the Division of Intervention and Prevention Services (formerly the Division of Juvenile Justice). I will be using the terms “youth,” “adolescents,” “minors” “residents” and “child/ren” interchangeably to refer to persons younger than age 18 years old. This division primarily serves youth whose primary presenting problem is behavioral. Youth become clients of this division after being assessed by another division within DHS as being at high risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system or they become clients after becoming adjudicated/actual involvement in the juvenile justice system. The division serves at-risk youth to include persons in need of supervision (PINS) (these are youth that have been determined to be beyond their parents’ control and require the family Court’s supervision), adjudicated youth, and youth remanded to Youth Rehabilitation Center (YRC) and the Anna’s Hope Group Home (AHGH).

Staff at the Division of Intervention and Prevention Services (DIPS) refer clients for treatment and rehabilitative services tailored to the needs of adolescents and their
families. The unit provides intervention, social work supportive services, counseling, and case management to families with chronic dysfunction and/or who are at high-risk. The Division has a total of 47 staff, 5 in the unit office in St. Croix, 4 in the St. Thomas/St. John district, 36 at the Youth Rehabilitation Center (YRC), and 2 at the Anna’s Hope Group Home (AHGH).

The District Unit offices in St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John are staffed by Family Services Specialists, Social Workers and District Managers who provide counseling, monitor clients’ compliance with court orders and make referrals for therapeutic services. The workers collaborate with school officials to monitor attendance and participation. They collaborate with various organizations to make referrals for therapeutic services to local private providers and identify community service placements. Clients are adolescents who have demonstrated at-risk behaviors such as truancy, drug use and lack of compliance with rules at home and school. At-risk clients are provided services to prevent them from entering the juvenile justice system. Youth are determined to be person in need of supervision (PINS) when a petition is initiated by parents in the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands after attempts to resolve behavioral issues are unsuccessful. The PINS case is assigned to a worker who works with the family to develop a plan that encourages the child to comply with the Court’s orders. Youth who come to the Court’s attention for having committed crimes or for having violated the Court’s orders can be remanded to YRC. When youth are released from YRC, the youth’s cases are not closed, the assigned Family Services Specialists and Social Workers follow up with the client and family to monitor compliance with probation guidelines.
The Youth Rehabilitation Center (YRC) is the only secure detention facility in the territory providing detainment for youth remanded by the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands in both districts. The facility houses youth that are on pre-trial status, youth that have been an adjudicated delinquent and youth legally transferred to adult status for committing serious felonies. The facility has 23 rooms with bunk beds for males in the secured area called the Courtyard, which is the original housing area at YRC. Since the pandemic, the Courtyard is used to quarantine male residents upon admission to the facility. There are also 22 beds for males in the dormitory called the Annex which is sectioned into two pods called Annex A and Annex B. Females are housed in a secure three (3) bed area called Intake. The Youth Rehabilitation Center provides intake, social services, education, recreation, nutrition, health, and mental health services, as well as all court-related and intervention services to its residents.

Correction Officers are the first contact for all persons coming into the facility, including residents. They provide safety and security for the persons within the facility and for residents on and off facility 24-hours per day, every day. In addition to their security duties, some Correction Officers assist residents with assignments, offer moral support and participate in recreational activities.

YRC’s residents’ social services needs are managed primarily by the treatment component. Additionally, they have an assigned Family Services Specialist or Social Worker in the Intervention Unit in their district of origin that also provides social services. YRC treatment staff conducts case management services to include scheduling and accompanying residents to medical appointments, supervising school participation, providing homework help, and encouraging compliance with facility
rules. Treatment staff plan social activities that are executed in coordination with the security.

Anna’s Hope Group Home serves clients needing emergency placement, court ordered evaluations and respite. The facility operates 24-hours per day. Staff provide supervision and guidance to the residents. A system of reward and consequences is used to encourage positive behavior. Therapeutic services are provided by therapists contracted by the Department of Human Services. Prior to the pandemic, the residents attended various schools in the community and participated in extra-curricular activities.

DIPS promotes prevention efforts through the support of programs and services designed to meet the needs of at-risk youth and those minors charged with the commission of a delinquent act. The goal of this Division is to provide individualized supervision, care, accountability, and treatment in a manner which equips the minor with skills needed to live responsibly and productively in our community. The Division strives to achieve this goal through collaboration with community partners such as the Virgin Islands National Guard Youth About Face Program, Department of Labor, University of the Virgin Islands, The Village and Youth Arise. These community partners provide programs and/or services that keep the clients engaged in positive activities and help the clients develop new social networks. Therapeutic services are provided by several clinicians who perform psychological evaluations and conduct individual, family, and group therapy.
In FY 2020, there were 159 clients (106 STT/STJ; 53 STX) who received services from DIPS. The client type was as follows: At-Risk: 37 (34 STT/J; 3 STX); PINS: 6 (1 STT/J; 5 STX); Adjudicated: 116 (71 STT/J; 45 STX). The current caseload is 115 (87 STT/J; STX 28) – 50 At-Risk (48 STT/J; 2 STX); 2 PINS (0 STT/J; 2 STX); and 63 Adjudicated (39 STT/J; 24 STX).

In FY 2020, 49 minors were remanded to YRC. Of the total number of minors served, 32 or 65% were from St. Croix and 17 or 35% were from the St. Thomas/St. John district. Thirty-four (34) minors were admitted for the first time to YRC during this period, in contrast to the fifteen (15) minors who were repeat admissions. The current census is 9 residents (4 STT/J; 5 STX), five (5) of those residents are repeat admissions. **BOLD – UPDATED INFORMATION DURING HEARING.**

The Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) works to facilitate and to ensure the best safety, permanency and well-being outcomes for children, youth, and families in the US Virgin Islands. This division (DCFS) provides case management services to children and their families in the Territory in accordance with appropriate federal and local statutes. The division has two components: The Protective Unit and the Foster Care/Adoptions Unit. Staffing for the Protective Unit includes four staff in the St. Croix District and three in the St. Thomas/St. John District, including the District Manager. The Foster Care/Adoptions Unit in the St. Croix district has three staff including the District Manager and three in the St. Thomas/St. John district.

The District Unit Offices in the Protective component is staffed by Family Services Specialists, Social Workers, Case Workers, and a District Manager. There is a District
Manager vacancy in the St. Croix district that dates back to 2016. The Protective Unit can also be called the In-Home Services Unit because it provides services to families that are presenting at risk factors for child abuse/neglect issues. This unit provides crisis intervention, case management and monitoring as well as advocacy and referral services. Children and families are referred to private providers of therapeutic and psychological services. Staff collaborate with school personnel, our local community clinics and parents to address areas of outstanding conflict to prevent the families’ at-risk factors from escalating to child maltreatment and the need to separate children from their families.

The Foster Care/Adoptions Units, one in each district, is staffed by Family Services Specialists, Social Workers and a District Manager. There is currently a District Manager vacancy in the St. Thomas district. In keeping with the division’s mandate to ensure the best safety, well-being and permanency outcomes for children and families, this component provides services to children and family where children have been separated from their families voluntarily and involuntarily. Children that are separated from their families of origin are placed in foster care, including congregate and residential treatment facilities within and outside of the territory, only if there are no relatives or fictive kin options available. This unit has local and federal mandates to ensure that children achieve permanency in a timely manner. The Department’s efforts are made to reunify children with their families of origin or with extended family and fictive kin. However, in the absence of a safe family, relatives and fictive kin options, termination of parental rights and the adoption option is pursued. When children are separated from their families of origin involuntarily, the process of reunification or other
safe permanency options takes place under the jurisdiction of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands Family Division.

Under the general umbrella of Protective care for at-risk families and Foster Care/Adoptions, DCFS also provides family preservation services, recruitment and training of the full range of foster and adoptive parents (called resource parents), adoption home studies (domestic and international) and custody recommendations to the court. The Division also works closely with the US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children - Children’s Bureau Region II team and the Capacity Building Centers for States. Current projects include: The National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive parents (NTDC). The NTDC is a new curriculum that replaces the Parents As Tender Healers (PATH) curriculum which has become dated. The NTDC is being piloted by Spauling.org through a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau.

The Children’s Bureau is also providing technical assistance to DCFS with the Territory’s rollout of the requirements of the Family First Prevention Services Act which is required nationwide by October 1, 2021. The campaignforchildren.org’s Family First Prevention Services Act Fact Sheet succinctly captures the spirit of the legislation, “…aims to prevent children from entering foster care by allowing federal reimbursement for mental health services, substance use treatment, and in-home parenting skill training. It also seeks to improve the well-being of children already in foster by incentivizing states to reduce placement of children in congregate care.” The Department is in the process of ensuring we comply by the deadline.
The Department of Humans Services became a Title IV-E agency in October 2016 and as such, receives several dedicated federal grants for Promoting Safe and Stable Families. The funding streams are Title IV-B Subpart 1 Child Welfare Social Services and the multiple Promoting Safe and Stable Families grants: Title IV-B Subpart 2 Promoting Safe and Stable Families, Promoting Safe and Stable Families – Monthly Caseworker Visit, Promoting Safe and Stable Families - Kinship Navigator, John H. Chafee Education and Training Voucher, John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood and Family Violence Prevention and Services Program. There are 3 other funding streams (Children’s Justice Act, Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) and Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) that have always been part of the Social Services Block Grant. The total funding amounts to about $1.3 million.

I would be remiss if I did not mention a few of our challenges. As you may be aware, both Divisions are experiencing severe staffing shortages that are evident across all divisions and programs within DHS. This lack of staff is rendering incredible efforts by very dedicated and professional staff to have limited effectiveness. Management staff are carrying caseloads and filling essential roles that are vacant. This need for management staff to be immersed in case-carrying activities is preventing much-needed management, administrative oversight, policy and procedural activities and updates that directly affect service provision and federal compliance.

The Territory through DCFS, has a lack of a robust tiered foster care system to allow for varying levels of care in family homes and appropriate options for step-
down/transitional homes for youth transitioning home from care (including off-island residential care, YRC, etc.) and for youth aging out of care.

The Division of Intervention and Prevention Services’ programs also have operational specific challenges. The phone system at YRC needs to be replaced. There is limited phone service with the use of three extensions and a cell phone. The Department’s Management Information System (MIS) division is working towards adding additional extensions until the entire system can be restored.

There is also inadequate connectivity at YRC. The use of wi-fi is being augmented by use of data cards (hot spots) to boost access. Improving connectivity/access to areas on the facility with poor reception will require additional equipment. This project is also being addressed by MIS.

We know and understand the physical plant at YRC is need of major renovations to address numerous issues compromising the structure. Managing the daily physical plant issues of the facility are constant. Structural renovations are needed to address the many electrical and plumbing issues that plague the facility. The facility is not inspiring: large sections of the plaster on the original buildings are cracked in places and have fallen off in other places. An expenditure of maintenance funds for FY 2021 is already at $30,000. The current plan is to continue addressing maintenance issues as they arise, but the building needs to be replaced. The Department is currently exploring funding sources for construction of new buildings at YRC. Unfortunately, Act 7697 passed by the 30th Legislature on September 14, 2014 and signed into law by Governor John P. de Jongh, Jr. on October 15, 2014 appropriated $3,072,600 for YRC
for construction of four new buildings. The 31st Legislature passed Act 7731 amending Act 7697 reducing the allotment for YRC from $3,072,600 for construction, to $72,600 for design of buildings on March 12, 2015. A veto of the act by Governor Kenneth E. Mapp on March 27, 2015 was overridden on December 22, 2015. The funding for YRC was lost. The funding for design of buildings has never been provided to the Department.

Employees in the St. Croix district Unit office were displaced because of the 2017 hurricanes. They were relocated to offices at AGHG. The spacing is extremely limited and is not conducive to the physical distancing required by the pandemic environment. As such, the St. Croix district Unit office staff continues to mostly work remotely. Additional space has been identified and we are in the process of securing funding and a lease agreement.

In summary, the Department of Human Services continues to make the most with much less resources and manpower, understanding there is more need for than we have services. We are, however, committed to seeking successful resolution of the identified challenges for the health and safety of our staff and clients. Chairman Carrion and the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide an overview of the operations and a status update on the Division of Children and Family Services and the Division of Intervention and Prevention Services. My team and I are available to answer any questions you may have regarding our testimony today.
CLOSING STATEMENT

Again, thank you for the opportunity Chairman Carrion and the committee members to provide a status two of the VI Department of Human Services, DCFS and DIPS. As a licensed social worker, I would like to celebrate the great profession and thank all the social workers as March is Social Work Month. The theme this year is Social Workers are essential. Social workers are essential to the community well-being, they are employed to affect positive change with individuals, families, groups, and entire communities. The essential and responsive DHS professional staff go above and beyond for their clients and their families, including nights, weekends, and holidays. This work is every day, not just 8a – 5p.

We know prevention is the key! Strengthening and supporting families to prevent abuse and neglect in all forms calls for active involvement from the Virgin Islands community, not just the Department of Human Services. Our children, youth and families need safe spaces for learning collaboration and communication to include group sports. We also need spaces for group conversations, education and awareness on child abuse and prevention. I am so grateful for our partner agencies who assist daily with some of these services and want to publicly thank them for their commitment to our children and families. I would like to reiterate, if you see something, please say something.