



THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks

Friday, September 19, 2025

SENATOR ANGEL BOLQUES, JR.



Government of the Virgin Islands of the United States

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Division of Senior Citizens Affairs

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TESTIMONY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES IN SUPPORT OF BILL NO. 36-0099 – THE ELDER ABUSE RESPONSE REFORM ACT BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON CULTURE, YOUTH, AGING, SPORTS, AND PARKS. Presented by: VIDHS Assistant Commissioner Taetia Phillips-Dorsett.

Good morning Honorable Senator Angel L. Bolques, Jr., Chairman of the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks, committee members and other Senators present, colleagues, and the listening and viewing audience. My name is Taetia Phillips Dorsett, Assistant Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (VIDHS). Accompanying me in the well today are Kishma Vincent, Assistant Administrator for the Senior Citizens Affairs Division; Ana C. Velez-Martinez, Director of Residential Services; Heather Richardson-Henry, District Manager for Adult Protective Services on St. Thomas; and Hope Thornhill, District Manager for Adult Protective Services on St. Croix.

On behalf of DHS and Commissioner Averil George, who could not be here today, due to a previously scheduled engagement, I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Bill No. 36-0099, the *Elder Abuse Response Reform Act*, which proposes amendments to Title 34, Chapter 15 of the Virgin Islands Code—The Elder and Dependent Adult Abuse Prevention Act.

This hearing is especially timely as it highlights the urgent need to raise visibility about the realities of elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and to emphasize the importance of protective systems that ensure our older adults and vulnerable residents can live safely and with dignity. Advancing this legislation sends a clear and unified message that the Virgin Islands is committed to meaningful action—not just recognition. This bill directly addresses the growing need for **stronger, more responsive, and more coordinated systems** to detect, prevent, and respond to the abuse, neglect, and exploitation of vulnerable adults in the Territory.

We thank you Senator Bolques for the outreach to the Department during the development of this legislation and for recognizing the urgent need for a more integrated and enforceable elder protection framework.

I. Overview and Support for the Bill's Intent

The Department of Human Services strongly supports the intent and core provisions of Bill No. 36-0099. Specifically, the bill establishes procedures for emergency protective orders in cases of abuse, mandates a territory-wide interagency response protocol, formalizes the creation of a Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) for case review and coordinated service delivery, and authorizes the development of an Elder and Dependent Adult Abuse Registry to support prevention, tracking, and accountability.

These provisions are essential to closing long-standing gaps in our adult protection infrastructure and ensure that no vulnerable individual falls through the cracks due to fragmented systems or insufficient legal authority.

1. **Emergency Protective Orders** – By requiring DHS to seek assistance from the Department of Justice to petition the VI Superior Court for **temporary or permanent protective orders** when an elder or dependent adult is in imminent danger, Bill No. 36-0099 closes a critical gap in our current legal framework. Elderly victims—whether suffering physical, emotional, financial, or sexual abuse—are often unable to protect themselves or escape unsafe environments. This clear authority for swift legal action ensures that abusers can be removed or victims relocated to safe temporary settings until longer-term solutions are arranged, providing immediate protection for those at highest risk.

National research underscores the importance of legal interventions in elder abuse cases. A 2020 study published in the *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect* found that jurisdictions with **expedited protective order processes** for older adults saw a **significant reduction** in repeated abuse and **faster access** to social services for victims.

Regionally, Caribbean territories such as **Barbados and Trinidad & Tobago** have implemented legislative measures allowing for emergency protective orders in cases of domestic or elder abuse, and early evaluations indicate that these measures **improve reporting rates and victim outcomes**. **

By formalizing DHS's ability to request such court orders, the bill ensures that timely interventions are possible even when victims cannot advocate for themselves. It aligns the Virgin Islands with best practices in both U.S. and regional elder protection frameworks, ensuring that vulnerable residents receive swift, coordinated, and effective protection from harm.

2. **Multidisciplinary Team (MDT)** – DHS supports the bill's mandate for DHS to establish a territory-wide Elder Anti-Abuse MDT. National research confirms that elder abuse cases often involve overlapping concerns—mental health, cognitive decline, caregiver stress, and legal complexity—that require the insight of multiple disciplines. The proposed structure will improve accountability, strengthen case outcomes, and ensure more consistent protections.

Studies consistently demonstrate that elder abuse cases often involve complex, overlapping issues—such as mental health concerns, cognitive decline, caregiver stress, and legal complexities—that require the expertise of various professionals. Regionally, the Center for Elder Abuse Solutions (CEASe) in New York City has implemented **Enhanced Multidisciplinary Teams (EMDTs)** that include professionals from diverse fields such as social work, medicine, law, and psychiatry. These teams have been instrumental in reviewing and coordinating responses to cases of elder abuse and neglect, leading to improved outcomes for older adults. **

3. **Elder Abuse Registry** – The Department also supports the establishment of an Elder Abuse Registry, which the bill appropriately places under the management of the Department of Justice. DHS welcomes its role in supporting this registry through case referrals, data sharing, and outreach to long-term care providers and advocacy organizations. However, bill No. 36-0099 does not earmark funding for the Dept. Of Justice to develop the technology to develop or implement a registry of this nature. If this registry is to include functionality beyond the capabilities of a simple Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, then funding should clearly be identified to support its inception. Additionally, DOJ should be provided with funding to hire Data Support Technician position (s) which will be tasked with the entry, management and data reporting functions for the Elder Abuse Registry. Without identification of crucial funding, the territory runs the risk if the bill passes of becoming another unfunded task with little sustainability success.

The establishment of an abuse registry is particularly significant. According to the **National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA)**, implementing such registries has been shown to reduce the hiring of individuals with substantiated abuse histories in caregiving positions, thereby enhancing the safety of vulnerable adults. Regionally, the Caribbean faces similar challenges. **

A synthesis report published by the United Nations in 2022 also highlights the need for policies and procedures to prevent and punish abuse or ill-treatment of older persons, emphasizing the importance of establishing systems to protect this demographic. **

In the United States, Alabama has pioneered the creation of an elder abuse registry through "**Shirley's Law**," enacted in 2022. This law mandates that individuals convicted of elder abuse, neglect, or financial exploitation be included in a publicly accessible registry, aiming to prevent further victimization. ** Such initiatives demonstrate the effectiveness of registries in safeguarding older adults and preventing recidivism.

Our Territory, the U.S. Virgin Islands, with its unique demographic and geographic characteristics, requires tailored solutions to combat elder abuse. The proposed registry under the Department of Justice's leadership, supported by DHS, will provide a centralized system to track and prevent abuse, ensuring that individuals with substantiated abuse histories are not able to move undetected between caregiving positions or facilities. This ensures that known abusers cannot easily move between caregiving roles undetected, while DOJ provides oversight, security, and legal authority.

II. Additional Recommendations for Implementation

While the core provisions of Bill No. 36-0099 are strong, the Department of Human Services respectfully offers several additional recommendations to ensure effective implementation and maximize the protective impact of the legislation:

1. **Funding and Staffing Support** – Implementing the MDT, processing protective orders, and supporting interagency coordination will require both staffing and technological infrastructure. DHS recommends explicit language designating the Department of Justice as the agency authorized to seek federal grants and local appropriations to support these mandates, particularly the Elder Abuse Registry, which falls under its statutory authority. DHS will provide substantiated case data and interagency coordination support, which also requires dedicated resources.
2. **Victim Transition Support** – Protective orders often necessitate the immediate relocation of victims. DHS recommends provisions ensuring that victims maintain access to safe housing, food, medication, and care coordination during and after relocation. Interventions must not create additional vulnerabilities for the individuals the department seeks to protect.
3. **Public Awareness and Education** – Elder abuse frequently goes unreported due to fear, shame, or lack of awareness. DHS recommends including language directing annual public awareness campaigns, to be led by DHS in collaboration with stakeholders, with appropriate local funding to support these efforts.
4. **Data Collection and Reporting** – DHS recommends requiring annual reporting on elder abuse investigations, MDT activities, and protective orders, as well as on DHS contributions to the Elder Abuse Registry managed by DOJ. This ensures transparency, allows measurement of progress in addressing elder abuse, and informs ongoing policy improvements.

III. Technical Amendment Recommendations

To further strengthen the clarity, precision, and effectiveness of the legislation, DHS respectfully proposes the following technical amendments:

- A. **Terminology Clarification** – Replace all uses of “elderly” with “older adults” to align with contemporary elder justice language used by the federal Administration for Community Living and other national initiatives.
- B. **Definitions** – Include a clear definition of “dependent adult,” consistent with existing Adult Protective Services standards, to avoid ambiguity regarding the populations covered.
- C. **Agency Role Clarification** – Specify that DHS remains the lead agency for Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) coordination, protective order support, training, and monitoring responsibilities under this chapter, while clarifying that the Department of Justice leads the Elder Abuse Registry. This ensures clear lines of responsibility and prevents inter-agency confusion.
- D. **Language Alignment with Current Practice** – Refer to the program as the “Adult Protective Services (APS) Program” throughout the legislation. Any new duties placed on APS should be clearly stated and accompanied by appropriate resources.
- E. **Cross-Reporting Requirements** – Include explicit language requiring cross-reporting between DHS and law enforcement when elder abuse is suspected. This aligns with nationwide best practices and ensures comprehensive protection for vulnerable adults.

IV. Elder Abuse Summits

While today’s testimony is focused on Bill No. 36-0099, it would be remiss not to highlight the recent Elder Abuse Summits hosted jointly by the Department of Human Services and **AARP Virgin Islands**. These gatherings underscore the urgency and relevance of the reforms now before this Committee, as they have provided critical platforms for interagency collaboration, professional training, and public awareness on elder abuse prevention and response.

- **Elder Abuse Summit, Session 1 (July 17–18, 2025):** This inaugural summit gathered law enforcement officers, legal professionals, healthcare providers, and community advocates to deepen our collective response to elder and dependent adult abuse. Retired Deputy District Attorney **Paul Greenwood**, a nationally recognized leader in elder justice, served as the keynote facilitator, setting a strong foundation for territory-wide collaboration.
- **Elder Financial Exploitation Prevention Summit, Session 2 (August 21–22, 2025):** Hosted simultaneously across both districts at the AARP Virgin Islands offices, this summit focused on financial exploitation and fraud prevention. Participants included financial sector leaders, investigators, Medicaid Fraud Control Unit representatives, and government employees dedicated to elder financial justice. The keynote presenter, **Zoime Alvarez Rubio**, President and CEO of the Puerto Rico Bankers Association, provided critical expertise on safeguarding older adults against financial harm.

- **Elder Justice Summit, Session 3 (Upcoming, September 29, 2025):** This upcoming event scheduled to convene at My Brother’s Workshop Campus on St. Thomas, this session will bring together caregivers, service providers, and older adults themselves to focus on care, support, and empowerment. Building on the momentum of the first two summits, this event will advance solutions-oriented dialogue and strengthen partnerships that directly benefit our aging population.

These summits reflect the Department’s commitment to not only strengthening statutory protections, but also fostering **education, collaboration, and proactive prevention efforts**. We are grateful to AARP Virgin Islands for their leadership in this work and to the many professionals who continue to support this shared mission.

V. Conclusion

Bill No. BR-25-0040 is a thoughtful, necessary expansion of our Territory’s elder and dependent adult abuse protections. It positions the Virgin Islands to meet national standards for elder justice, to better protect our vulnerable adults, and to work collaboratively across agencies with consistency and urgency. With the inclusion of our recommended enhancements—especially around implementation and resource support—we are confident that this legislation will result in more timely, coordinated, and compassionate protection for residents in need.

Thank you for your leadership on this issue and for the opportunity to present our testimony. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.

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