

The Virgin Islands Consortium

If USVI Were Treated As Its Own Country, It Would Place 7th In World Per Capita For Gun-Related Deaths; U.S. Attorney's Office Wants To Change That

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“Reducing violent crime and enhancing public safety are primary goals of the U.S. Attorney’s Office here in the Virgin Islands,” U.S. Attorney Gretchen C.F. Shappert announced in a release issued Monday. “On the one-year anniversary of the re-energized Project Safe Neighborhoods, we are moving forward with renewed energy to investigate and prosecute violent crime, even as we celebrate the hard work and dedication of our community and law enforcement PSN partners.”

One year ago, the Department of Justice announced the revitalization and enhancement of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), which Attorney General Jeff Sessions has made the centerpiece of the department's violent crime reduction strategy. PSN is an evidence-based program that has proven effective at reducing violent crime. Through PSN, community stakeholders work together to identify the most pressing violent crime problems in the community and develop comprehensive solutions to address them. As part of this strategy, PSN focuses enforcement efforts on the most violent offenders and partners with locally based prevention and reentry programs for lasting reductions in crime.

Here in the territory, the U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO) has collaborated with federal and territorial law enforcement, local organizations, and members of the community to re-focus on violent crime prosecutions, to increase training opportunities, to enhance partnerships, and to develop new strategies designed to reduce violent crime and make neighborhoods safer for everyone, according to the release. Ongoing communication and dialog are important components of the strategy.

"Project Safe Neighborhoods is a proven program with demonstrated results," Mr. Sessions said. "We know that the most effective strategy to reduce violent crime is based on sound policing policies that have proven effective over many years, which includes being targeted and responsive to community needs. I have empowered our United States Attorneys to focus enforcement efforts against the most violent criminals in their districts, and directed that they work together with federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement and community partners to develop tailored solutions to the unique violent crime problems they face. Each United States Attorney has prioritized the PSN program, and I am confident that it will continue to reduce crime, save lives, and restore safety to our communities."

As examples of the revitalized PSN program, Shappert pointed to significant examples of collaboration that are designed to improve public safety:

Enforcement Actions:

- An ongoing case-screening process between the USAO and the Virgin Islands Attorney General's Office to identify the most appropriate forum for criminal prosecution of cases that impact our communities;
- A strong emphasis on federal prosecution of firearms cases to prevent additional acts of violence. In July, for example, defendants on St. Croix were sentenced to federal prison for mailing a pistol and an AR-15 lower receiver through the U.S. mails and for possession of a firearm associated with a planned robbery. Other federal firearms prosecutions have focused on the use of firearms in the commission of violent felonies, such as robbery, and the apprehension of individuals who are prohibited under federal law from carrying a firearm, such as convicted felons.
- Systematic investigation and prosecution of criminal groups—conspiracies, crews, and gangs—that use violence for monetary gain. Following the violent robbery of the Gems and Gold Corner jewelry store in St. Thomas, three of the perpetrators were convicted in a January of 2018 jury trial in federal court. Five other members of the conspiracy entered guilty pleas, one on a separately filed bill of information. Members of the

conspiracy received significant federal sentences and were ordered to pay restitution.

- Recognizing the strong nexus between violent crime and narcotics trafficking, federal law enforcement in the USVI have re-doubled their efforts to apprehend drug smugglers in the territory. These efforts have led to recent drug seizures on vessels and at the airport. In September of 2018, for example, approximately 36 kilograms of cocaine were seized at the Cyril E. King Airport on a single day.

Recent Training Opportunities for Federal and Territorial Law Enforcement:

- March 2018: discovery training for law enforcement to ensure professional investigation and prosecution of criminal cases, consistent with legal and constitutional requirements.
- May 2018: asset forfeiture and victim issues training to support efforts to “take the profit out of crime” and to ensure that law enforcement is sensitive to victim-related issues in criminal cases.
- Ongoing roll-call trainings for VIPD personnel by federal prosecutors and agents on timely legal issues.
- September 2018: “The Blue Campaign”, a DHS-USAO collaboration to train law enforcement and community members on how to identify human trafficking. Classes for law enforcement also included training on how to investigate and prosecute these crimes.

Community Outreach:

- PSN-sponsored community discussions at Public Housing meetings.
- Law enforcement and federal prosecutor presentations at local schools.
- Radio presentations to discuss public safety issues.
- Community meetings and a round-table discussion of human trafficking issues.

Despite these efforts, the violent crime rate in the territory remains high. A recent PBS News Hour noted that for 2016, the international gun-related deaths per capita statistics place the U.S. Virgin Islands seventh in the world if the USVI were treated as its own country.

“We all agree that the violent-crime rate for the territory is unacceptable,” Ms. Shappert said. “We have our work cut out for us. Working together, we will develop and strengthen the necessary relationships that will enable us to create safer communities.”

Learn more about Project Safe Neighborhoods.