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Homicides Rise 29 Percent Over 2019 in USVI as Governor Calls on Community to Speak Up

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Bullet casings and broken glass on a crime scene. By. iStock/VICONSORTIUM

When Albert Bryan ran for governor of the Virgin Islands two years ago, curtailing crime in the territory was one of the cornerstones of his campaign. Today, gun violence continues to rise, and Mr. Bryan, like his predecessors, has found himself in a similar position: calling on the community to assist law enforcement in bringing criminals to justice.

During the governor's Tuesday Covid-19 response update, Mr. Bryan said the community has a responsibility to help ascertain safety by reporting wrongdoing. "We have to stand as one people to establish wrong from right and discontinue our silent overlooking of wrong that happens in our community," he said. "Whether it's an illegal horse track, drag racing, prostitution, loitering in

places where you don't belong, the illegal numbers game and the gambling houses, trespassing — all these things we have to say no more to as a community."

Mr. Bryan's plea for community support comes days after 21-year-old Kadiyen Illidge was killed after being [caught in the crossfire of a shootout](#) Friday night. At least four other people were shot Friday night on St. Croix. A day later [three people were shot in St. Thomas](#), bringing the total reported shootings to eight between Friday and Saturday.

Friday's homicide was the territory's 41st for 2020. The 39th homicide [occurred in St. Thomas at the Oswald Harris Court](#) on September 13, followed by the 40th incident less than an hour later on the Melvin Evans Highway on St. Croix, where a 20-year-old woman [was pursued by high-speed chase](#) and was shot and killed.

On Friday during a Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, Public Safety and Veterans Affairs hearing, legislators received testimony from V.I.P.D. Commissioner Trevor Velinor relative to the increase in gun violence and V.I.P.D. efforts to confront the problem.

Mr. Velinor told the committee that the police force has been tactically combating gun violence with help from both federal and local partners. "The V.I.P.D. considers the territory's gun offenses very seriously and will continue to collaborate with our federal and local partners alike to yield arrests and prosecute these cases aggressively," said Mr. Velinor.

The V.I.P.D. has partnered with the V.I. Port Authority and the Department of Tourism to introduce a firearms substation at both the Cyril E. King and the Henry E. Rohlsen airports. "Our experience confirms that firearms are secreted within luggage and then brought into the territory, ending up on our streets to commit acts of violence," said the police commissioner. "V.I.P.D. will continue to work with U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, ATF, and other federal agencies to interdict these firearms before they can get on our streets." Mr. Velinor said these substations are scheduled to open within the next few weeks.

Along with the firearms substation at the airports, with the help of 911, the V.I.P.D. utilizes an application software called "ShotSpotter" to assist with reporting a firearm complaint. The ShotSpotter software utilizes a series of microphones that are placed in strategic locations around the territory. The microphones listen for the distinctive sound of gunshots, then precisely and swiftly determines the shooting location, the number of shots fired, and possibly the type of firearms (machine gun or semi-automatic). In less than a minute, police officers and 911 dispatchers are notified of the gunfire incidents, even if no one calls 911.

Mr. Velinor said ShotSpotter has allowed the police department to rapidly deploy police personnel to areas upon receiving the alert, and it also provides officers with as much real-time information as possible when responding to the gunfire, the commissioner said.

However, despite the V.I.P.D.'s initiatives to curtail crime, homicides have risen 29 percent compared to 2019, the commissioner made known during the hearing. As of Friday, the V.I.P.D. had made 14 arrests related to 9 of the 41 homicides.

Committee chairman Steven Payne expressed frustration with the rising crime even as the police department continues to receive help from federal partners. "I am concerned because despite the federal and local partnerships, there is a rise in crime in comparison to last year when people were free to traverse," said Mr. Payne, emphasizing that even though the territory is under a state of emergency due to Covid-19 and even as mass gatherings are prohibited, gun violence remains pervasive. "There needs to be more police presence in areas where shots are constantly fired," he

said.

Agreeing with Mr. Payne's sentiments, Senator Myron Jackson, an avid advocate for combating gun violence, asked, "What is the cost of 40 lives to gun violence to this territory? Can you put a dollar value on that for me?" Mr. Velinor responded, "No, I cannot place a value on a life." Mr. Jackson told the commissioner that there were over 1,000 families in the territory who deserve an explanation and closure for the sudden and violent loss of their loved ones, and that there is a dire need for a comprehensive approach to reducing gun violence.

"We have some public safety challenges in our territory. It didn't start in 2020, and it didn't start in 2019. We saw the trajectory, and we can do something about it. We are in this fight together—the legislative and executive branches of government, the community, and certainly, the dedicated men and women of the Virgin Islands Police Department," said Mr. Velinor.

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