

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Woman Facing Serious Jail Time For Allegedly Lying About Gun Found on Her Husband in Bid to Protect Him

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Amanie Mathurin **January 06, 2022**



ST. THOMAS — A mother of four may serve time behind bars for allegedly making false claims in an attempt to obstruct the prosecution of her husband, a convicted felon found in possession of an illegal firearm.

On Friday morning Vanessa Mercado presented herself to police to make a report of grand larceny. She told police that she drove her husband to the Schneider Regional Medical Center for medical assistance and that upon arrival at the facility, he suddenly had a seizure. Mercado claimed that she started to panic and mistakenly placed her

firearm in her husband's lap. According to Mercado, her husband was taken aback and was wheeled into the emergency room with the firearm still in his lap. She further alleged that a security officer confiscated the weapon from her husband and refused to give it back when she requested it. Mercado claimed that the weapon was a grey Glock 9x19 Gen 4 Austria valued at \$1,000.

An official police report was filed based on the information provided, and investigations proved that the firearm in question was found on the person of Ahmaud Rodriguez, a convicted felon who was recently charged with a series of firearm-related offenses. Further investigations revealed that contrary to Mercado's claims, the firearm was removed from Rodriguez's waistband by medical personnel who were attending to him. Officers also determined that the firearm Mercado claimed to have placed in her husband's lap did not match the weapon recovered from Rodriguez's person. The firearm retrieved by hospital staff was a black Glock Model 19, 9x19, Gen 4. Police confirmed that that was the only weapon recovered by hospital staff on the day in question.

After running a records check based on the firearm's serial number, officers confirmed that a resident of Hillsborough County Florida had reported it stolen from his vehicle a few years ago. As previously reported, Rodriguez was charged with a total of 5 offenses including possession of stolen property, possession of an unlicensed firearm and felon in possession of a firearm.

The probable cause fact sheet accompanying Mercado's arrest states that "investigators believe that Mercado registered a false report with police to hinder police from prosecuting her husband from being unlawfully in possession of a firearm due to his status as a convicted felon and because he is currently under federal supervision with probation."

On Wednesday, Judge Paula Norkaitis informed Mercado that having been charged with the crime of accessory to the fact, she faces up to half of the maximum imprisonment that her husband faces. That means she faces a five-year mandatory minimum in relation to Rodriguez's charge of unauthorized possession of a firearm and a 7.5 year mandatory minimum in connection with his charge of felon in possession of a firearm. Mercado is additionally charged with third-degree false reporting, fraudulent claims upon the government, delaying and obstructing and misprision of a felony.

Attorney Julie Todman requested that Mercado be released on her own recognizance, emphasizing that she has no prior convictions. According to Todman, Mercado has been in the Virgin Islands for over 5 years and has 4 children with her in the territory. The attorney asserted that the accused is not a flight risk and should receive the least restrictive bail conditions possible. However, Assistant V.I. Attorney General Brenda Scales argued that Mercado should not be released without a cash bail condition, noting that she has not spent significant time in the jurisdiction. Judge Paula Norkaitis affirmed that the court was very concerned about the charges, before concluding that bail would be set in the form of an unsecured bond valued at \$12,000. Mercado will be released into the third-party custody of an in-law and must surrender her Florida driver's license and any other travel documents to the court. She is prohibited from leaving the territory without prior court permission.