

logo not found or type unknown

Florida's Lax Gun Laws Contribute to V.I. Homicides, VIPD Says; Over 80 Weapons Taken Off Streets This Year

Crime / **Published On June 13, 2023 02:42 PM /**

Janeke Simon **June 13, 2023**

Image not found or type unknown



In a press conference on Tuesday, senior officials of the V.I. Police Department once again spent the majority of their time addressing the scourge of gun violence, issuing impassioned pleas for information from the community, and speaking frankly of the huge influx of illegal firearms and ammunition pouring into the territory's porous borders, while local and federal partners battle desperately to seize a fraction of the contraband as it comes in.

Lieutenant Shelly- Ann Stanley Cannonier, Chief of Detectives for St. Thomas, St. John, and Water Island, reported that there have been 10 homicides in the district since the beginning of the year. Arrests have been made in five of the matters.

Meanwhile, Ms. Cannonier's counterpart on St. Croix, Commander Lieutenant Naomi Joseph, named each of the 10 homicide victims in her district – Andy Christian, Akeem Javois, Kathryn Almony, Milton Gordon, Ersdale Joseph, Jahmari Santiago, Ja'yomi Roberts, Robinson Robles, Jahmari Gardner, Amon Walcott. She noted that in several of the cases, the victim was gunned down in a crowded setting. "Somebody saw something, somebody knows something," Cmdr. Joseph said, referencing to the shooting at the Climax Nightclub that claimed the lives of Santiago and Roberts. "The nightclub was closing, individuals were leaving, [they] were outside when this happened." Noting the vital role community assistance plays in helping the VIPD solve crimes, Cmdr. Joseph pleaded with the listening public. "Unfortunately, we have to come to you because we were not there. And we need your assistance to bring closure to these two families."

Robles was also shot and killed while in a populated area. Cmdr. Joseph described the scene as a "free for all – people driving all directions, wrong directions on the streets, and basically doing as they please."

Once again, she urged members of the public to come forward with information they may have, and again in the case of 16-year old Aman Walcott, who was shot to death last Saturday. "He was killed by someone he knew," the commander said as she issued a direct and specific invitation to the "girls that he hung with on a daily basis" to call her directly, on telephone number (340)-712-6092, to tell the police "some more background information on Aman's life – who he was seeing, who he was dating, even secret friends that nobody else knows about but the girls know about."

December's shooting of Bradley Maxwell also must have had witnesses, Cmdr. Joseph insisted. "Somebody saw when this gentleman shot and killed Mr. Bradley Maxwell on the streets of Frederiksted – in the middle of the street!" She rebutted hypothetical arguments that Maxwell had found himself on the wrong side of the law one too many times. "Bradley was somebody's son," she said. "He was somebody's father. And they too, would like justice."

Cmdr. Joseph's closing remarks seemed almost prescient ahead of questions coming from the press. "I know we are taking guns off of the street, but no sooner do we do that than we have more on," she lamented.

How much more, and exactly where they are coming from, is not data that the VIPD has at hand, said Sean Santos, St. Croix District Chief of Police. However, he did indicate that while traffic stops were turning up illegal firearms and ammunition on a relatively regular basis, law enforcement officials stationed at the territory's two airports, as well as local and federal law enforcement partners trying to track weapons sent through the postal service, were seizing significantly higher numbers. "This is one of our biggest initiatives," said Santos. However, the resources of the VIPD have to be stretched to cover both airports, the territory's highways and byways, as well as the entire coastline, aided by federal partners.

The volume of the illicit weapon flow meant that the 39 firearms seized off the streets of St. Croix, and 46 picked up in the district of St. Thomas/St. John/Water Island, with even more taken from the airports, these numbers pale in comparison to how much contraband is coming in. "We do have an issue with open borders," said Stephen Phillip, Police Chief for St. Thomas/St. John and Water Island. Both Santos and Philip acknowledged that the extremely permissive regulatory environment surrounding possession and purchase of firearms and ammunition in the state of Florida made it an even greater challenge to curb the influx of guns into the territory.

"I can say it straight up," said Mr. Santos. "Our own people would go and purchase these firearms in parts, send it down to other community members here in our territory, [who] build them right

back up, and send them out into our streets.” He noted that the U.S. Postal Service, Homeland Security and other federal agencies are coordinating efforts with local law enforcement to address the mail system as a source of illegal weapons and firearms into the USVI, but emphasized that it was an intricate process. “Our biggest thing is trying not to violate anyone’s constitutional rights,” said the St. Croix police chief, highlighting the delicate balance law enforcement officials must sometimes take in efforts to fight crime.

“To be very blunt,” said Philips, “the laws in the states are very weak.” Referencing a recent change in legislation in Florida, he noted that at gun shows and dealerships across the state, “all they have to do now is present a driver’s license.” The ease of acquiring guns in nearby states such as Florida will mean a commensurate increase in weapons flowing into the territory, the St. Thomas police chief argued. Urging the adoption of collective responsibility among community members who may know of friends and family members in possession of illegal firearms, Chief Philips said, “the only [thing] these firearms are doing is killing one another. Ourselves, our own people, and it needs to stop.”

Ghost Guns, or kit guns, or 80 percent firearms, according to Santos, represent a large number of the increase in illegal firearms seen in the territory. People are turning to YouTube to learn how to assemble weapons components, then “they start their own gun business,” Chief Santos said. “They’re building these firearms and then before you know it, they’re out there selling it out to the streets....They would have their relatives or friends on the mainland help them out by doing these purchases and sending it down.”

Sometimes, the gun components are sent without the recipient’s knowledge. “Before you know it...someone in this community gonna have a relative ship in some sort of a...gun part in their mail and they don’t even know about it,” Santos added.

The VIPD’s efforts to stem the flow of firearms in the territory has gone beyond just detection, seizure and arrests. Chief Santos, speaking about the issue of weapons being trafficked by mail, noted that senior VIPD officials have been coordinating with members of the V.I. Legislature to create some laws that would empower law enforcement to better move against weapons coming in via that route.