

The Virgin Islands Consortium

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Band-Aids or Full Reform, V.I.P.D. Must Decide

Multiple incidents of gun violence that have gone uncharged have led the community to reevaluate the mission of the Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD). As documented by the VIPD, "The mission of the Virgin Islands Police Department is to ensure the safety and protect the life and property of the inhabitants and visitors of the Virgin Islands; to prevent crime, preserve the public peace and tranquility; to detect and arrest criminal offenders; to enforce all laws, ordinances and provisions of the V. I. Code over which the Department has jurisdiction; and to perform, other related duties as directed by the Police Commissioner."

While their recent efforts towards crime prevention are indeed commendable, the police department's surge in the arrest of individuals' unlawfully carrying firearms has yet to quell the fear of many law-abiding Virgin Islanders. This is likely due to the community's perception that the VIPD operates under a reactionary policing model, in which new programs and initiatives are implemented only after the community suffers a major incident. Under this model, systems and policies are often developed quickly and haphazardly, resulting in short-lived programs and unsustainable benefits. This may be a result of the limited funding, as representatives of the police department have noted that the VIPD suffers from lack of manpower.

However, even with those factors taken into consideration, it falls squarely within the responsibility of the VIPD to formally articulate a clear strategy to the residents and visitors of the US Virgin Islands with respect to how it plans to fulfill its mandate to protect every individual. At this point in time, the VIPD has failed to fulfill this commitment.

One initiative that has been announced publicly by Governor Kenneth Mapp to address the issue of gun violence is a partnership between the VIPD and the New York Police Department (NYPD). In this partnership, officers will be swapped between the two police departments. Officers from the Virgin Islands will be allowed access to various NYPD training schools, including their police academy and investigative school. Moreover, police officers from the NYPD will travel to the Virgin Islands to assist in the training of local officers.

While the implementation of this police officer exchange program is certainly a step in the right direction, it is unclear how this program will address the issue of manpower if a simple 1:1 exchange is to be expected and how the results will be sustained long-term. The program also fails to address how the police department plans to engage their biggest asset: the residents of the community. It becomes difficult for a police department to operate successfully when it loses the trust and confidence of the community and this training program by itself cannot be expected to rebuild the trust that has been lost. Especially considering the epidemic of police brutality that has been impacting Americans in the continental United States.

As a part of this program VIPD officers will be trained and/or mentored using the same programs and quite possibly by some of the same officers that have betrayed the oath that they have taken to protect. While gun violence is certainly a huge concern in the USVI, we haven't suffered from outbursts of violence against citizens by police officers. Therefore concerns around whether this new training program is counter-productive and would allow the USVI to be infected by police brutality are certainly real and should be addressed. Would Islanders become more fearful that they could become victims of police brutality in the form of tasings, unlawful and unwarranted arrests and etc.?

Even in the event that these fears of police brutality are calmed, one must still wonder if a new police officer training program is enough to solve the issue of violence. The recent rash of arrests with relations to illegal firearms should be applauded, but it does not go nearly deep enough. It is simply a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound. These arrests target the demand-side of the illegal gun market; however it does not deal with supply or the underlining

issues as to why these young men feel like they need to arm themselves to feel safe and secure.

A report published by the National Institute of Justice states, "To reduce gun violence, a sustained program that addresses both demand and supply is needed. A successful intervention will have elements of federal-local law enforcement collaboration, community involvement, targeted intervention tactics and continuous program evaluation." The essence of this method seems to be missing in our approach to the recent rave of gun violence in the territory.

In testimony given to the USVI legislature acting Police Commissioner Delroy Richards testified that without increased funding from what is currently placed in the budget by the Governor, they may have to cut various community-based programs that have already seen cuts in years past. A lot of those community based programs serve as the department's attempt at intervention with youth and building better community relationships with the residents in which they serve.

These relationships and programs are crucial in the time in which we live. These programs can help provide the guidance and mentorship to some of the young men in our community who may be missing these things on a daily basis for various reasons. The relationships that our officers can build with our residents in theory through these programs are ones of trust and dependability. These relationships help our community to see our officers in a different lens, because most of the time, our only interaction with law enforcement officers is during a time of personal or communal crisis.

We also have to figure out a way to provide credible alternatives to our young men. Prevention and intervention programs that work can have lasting effects on our young people that may otherwise choose a life of crime. Most young men drawn to the criminal element would choose legitimacy, if offered a credible and tangible way towards that destination.

One such program that does a great job at that is My Brother's Workshop. My Brother's Workshop is a non-profit Virgin Islands charitable corporation that has been organized to provide hope, faith, and purpose to at-risk and high-risk young people in the USVI by offering mentoring, counseling, paid job training, education, and job placement. The program focuses on both

male and female youth between the ages of 16-24 who dropped out of school, were involved in gang related activities, have a criminal record, are marginally literate, and/or live in poverty. It also provides participants with paid job training opportunities in industries that are proven economical outlets in the US Virgin Islands, such as construction and small trade skills, hospitality and tourism.

It is imperative that programs such as these remain continually funded and supported, absent of any political biases. There are other programs in the community that also do a great job. These programs have very substantial and quantitative results in the battle against crime and more importantly poverty.

These types of community mentoring programs with a proven track record of success should not lose funding when faced with budgetary issues. It is my fervent belief, that investing in violence prevention and intervention programs now will benefit both the government and the community as less money will be required to maintain the prison system and less of the community's youth will be lost to senseless violence.

The Virgin Islands government must devise a strategy that can be laid out for residents and police officers to understand such that we can begin to solve the problems that exist within our community. However, these problems should not to simply be laid at the feet of the VIPD or the local elected officials, but also at the feet of our community. We must take ownership of the situation, offer solutions, demand action, and support incentives once programs have been put into place. Only then will our community be restored to its former glory.