

# VISGO

VIRGIN ISLANDS SAFE GUN OWNERS

## PRESS RELEASE

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **VISGO Introduces Substitute Amendment to Bill 36-0144 Centered on Safe Community Spaces and Constitutional Firearms Modernization**

Virgin Islands Safe Gun Owners (VISGO) today released its promised substitute amendment to Bill 36-0144—including a clean bill text and a redlined Exhibit A comparing changes to the current unconstitutional Virgin Islands firearms law. The VISGO substitute modernizes firearms licensing and registration under objective standards while investing directly in violence-prevention solutions led by Safe Community Spaces for youth and families.

VISGO committed to producing a serious, alternative, constitutional bill at the town hall held Monday, December 1, 2025, organized by Senator Clifford A. Joseph, Sr. (main sponsor of Bill 36-0144), after residents raised concerns that the Joseph bill and proposed amendments failed to address key constitutional, due-process, and administrative issues.

On December 16, 2025, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a civil lawsuit against the Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD), and Police Commissioner Mario Brooks (official capacity), alleging unconstitutional delays and unlawful conditions in the existing firearms licensing process.

VISGO's substitute amendment is designed to resolve the public's due-process concerns and to align territorial practice with constitutional requirements. It addresses issues described in the Department of Justice lawsuit and in ongoing civil-rights litigation challenging Virgin Islands' licensing and renewal practices, by setting enforceable processing deadlines, limiting discretionary and unpublished requirements, and strengthening administrative and judicial review.

### **Safe Community Spaces: The Centerpiece of the VISGO Proposal**

VISGO emphasizes that the centerpiece of this substitute amendment is a practical violence-prevention strategy that reaches beyond regulation: creating and sustaining Safe Community Spaces where youth can engage in structured, disciplined activities, receive tutoring and mentorship, and build pathways to academic success.

This bill appropriates \$250,000 to support Project Bleachers and other safe recreational space improvements, paired with coordinated programming to expand supervised after-school and weekend outlets that strengthen family and community bonds.

“You don’t stop crime by hardening gun laws. You stop it by building safe spaces where young people can belong, flourish and imagine a future.” Special Counsel to VISGO Michelle Meade of Meade, PC said. “Belonging is the best violence prevention and building safe communities is the answer.”

## **Key Features of the Substitute Amendment**

Safe Community Spaces funding and cross-agency coordination to support youth programming, tutoring, mentorship, and pathways to college, trade school, apprenticeships, and employment.

- Objective, non-discretionary (“shall-issue”) licensing standards for qualified applicants, with limits on ad hoc requirements and unpublished policies.
- Enforceable application processing timelines, including written completeness notices and a deemed-approval remedy when deadlines are missed.
- Elimination of mandatory firearm inspection and warrantless home inspection practices as conditions of licensing, renewal, endorsement, or registration.
- Strengthens due-process protections, including expedited review through a Firearms Review Board and de novo judicial review standards.
- Targeted public-safety measures, including prohibitions and enhanced penalties for machine gun conversion devices.

## **Registration: Keeping What Works, Fixing What Does Not**

The Virgin Islands already has a firearms registration system. VISGO’s substitute amendment keeps that system—despite the fact that many U.S. states (VISGO’s preliminary count is about 29) do not require general firearm registration—because registered firearms are not the driver of violent crime in the Territory. Registered firearms are overwhelmingly possessed by vetted, law-abiding residents; criminals do not register illegal firearms. In VISGO’s view, the original Bill 36-0144 expands restrictions on compliant residents while doing little to stop the illegal firearms already on the streets.

In prepared testimony on Bill 36-0144, retired VIPD Sgt. Bernard Burke (former Director of Firearms) stated that criminals are not willing to endure the registration process and that he had not observed legal, registered firearms being used to commit crimes or endanger police officers. He was prepared to testify to these facts at a Rules Committee hearing before the meeting was abruptly cancelled.

VISGO’s substitute amendment modernizes the registration and licensing process without turning compliant residents into criminals: it shifts to objective, record-based eligibility standards; establishes a \$25 initial fee and a \$25 renewal fee every five years (per licensee, not per firearm); sets enforceable processing timelines; strengthens privacy protections for licensing and registry records; and provides meaningful review for denials, suspensions, and delays.

VISGO also notes that nationally, firearms subject to the federal registration framework under the National Firearms Act—including lawfully registered machine guns—are rarely implicated in violent crime. VISGO cites that only a handful of well-documented cases (often cited as three) involving lawfully registered machine guns have occurred in the United States and none in the Virgin Islands since 1934, reinforcing the need to focus enforcement on illegal weapons and trafficking rather than imposing unnecessary burdens on vetted, registered owners.

## **Community-Driven Drafting and Expert Consultation**

VISGO developed the substitute amendment in consultation with local stakeholders, law-abiding firearms owners, certified firearms instructors, federal agents, active and retired police officers,

veterans, V.I. Senators, representatives from the V.I. Office of Gun Violence Prevention (see attached photo from a community pledge session), Federal Firearms Licensees (FFL), learned Virgin Islands legal counsel, and constitutional attorneys familiar with Second Amendment and due-process issues. VISGO states that the proposal is intended to be transparent, workable, and legally durable—written by the people, for the people.

### **Statement from VISGO Lead**

“This is written by the people, for the people. We can protect constitutional rights and reduce violence—but we have to focus on what works,” said Kosei Ohno, Lead of VISGO. “Safe Community Spaces are the heart of this proposal: give our youth structure, mentorship, and academic support, and you reduce the pull of violence. And we keep the Virgin Islands’ registration system—while fixing the process—because criminals don’t register illegal firearms and registered owners are not driving violent crime. It’s time to listen to law-abiding citizens and correct the unconstitutional barriers now being challenged in federal court.”

### **Call to Action**

VISGO urges the 36th Legislature to replace Bill 36-0144 with VISGO’s substitute amendment and to schedule public hearings that allow residents, community partners, and subject-matter experts to provide testimony on both civil-rights compliance and effective violence-prevention strategies. VISGO encourages public participation and asks that any final legislation focus on reducing violent crime while protecting the constitutional rights of law-abiding residents.

### **Attachments and Public Resources**

- VISGO Substitute Amendment to Bill 36-0144 (Clean Draft)
- Exhibit A (Redlined) — Full Chapter 5 substitute showing changes to current law
- Sgt. Bernard Burke (Ret.) Testimony on Bill 36-0144 (Oct. 9, 2025)
- VISGO Summary of Changes & Constitutional Justification
- Virgin Islands Daily News (Jan. 20, 2026) — Project Bleachers: “Project seeks to rebuild bleachers at Sub Base Tennis Courts”
- U.S. Department of Justice press release and complaint (Dec. 16, 2025) regarding firearms licensing practices in the U.S. Virgin Islands
- Photo — VISGO Lead, Mr. Ohno (second row, second person from the left) participating in the V.I. Office of Gun Violence Prevention community pledge session (provided by VISGO)

### **About VISGO**

Virgin Islands Safe Gun Owners (VISGO) is a community organization committed to constitutional rights, lawful firearms ownership, firearms safety education, and evidence-based public safety initiatives that reduce violent crime while respecting civil liberties.

Attachment Photo: V.I. Office of Gun Violence Prevention pledge session (community safety commitment).

