



**TESTIMONY OF GERALDINE PITT, CEO OF VIYA
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION AND
TELECOMMUNICATIONS
January 24, 2024**

Honorable Chairman Marvin Blyden, Members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, esteemed members of the 35th Legislature and their staff, and the attentive audience, I, Geraldine Pitt, am honored to appear before you today as the Chief Executive Officer for the Virgin Islands Telephone Corporation, known locally as Viya. I am grateful for the opportunity to testify on the current state and future of telecommunications in the Territory, as well as Viya's primary goal of keeping the community connected.

Viya's Winning, Customer-First Mindset

In 2024, we are on the threshold of an exhilarating journey- one that will see Viya undergo a remarkable transformation, propelling us to new heights as the premier telecommunications provider in the region. Although change can be perceived as a challenge, we must evolve to fulfill our potential.

When I last appeared before this committee just four months ago, I detailed Viya's efforts to reinforce a winning, customer-first mindset to solidify our operating model and deliver on our customer promise. Every decision we make is driven by a focus on putting the customer first and delivering quality customer care and first-time resolution.

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An essential part of this effort involves addressing Viya's existing approach to Customer Care, which has been identified as an area in need of improvement through feedback from our customers.

The results of an extensive customer satisfaction survey conducted last summer, indicated that although there have been improvements in the brand, community engagement and overall customer experience, the key area of improvement identified was customer support. As a result, we have dedicated considerable time and resources to analyzing the customer journey, identifying pain points and determining how to simplify and streamline the customer's interaction with Viya.

Viya recognizes that this current segmented operating model is no longer conducive to meeting the evolving needs of customers especially in a competitive online environment. We must change to fully embrace the current direction of technology and the ever-changing needs of our customers. The pandemic has accelerated technology adoption and affected the supply chain worldwide, making it difficult and costly for a technology company, on our scale to meet customer demands. We believe organizational changes are necessary for us to remain competitive and deliver the highest quality customer service. Viya will always put the VI first, and we will continue to be a preferred employer and a place of growth for anyone interested in embracing the technology changes,



certifications, and requirements for today's telecommunications environment. We must move forward for the benefit of the people of the Virgin Islands.

We will focus on proactive communication that will include introducing text messages to deliver account information, bill payment reminders, and scheduling details. This will ensure that our customers are always informed and empowered to manage their accounts at their convenience and with ease. This also includes implementing a new Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system that focuses on delivering proactive messages, providing more payment options, and empowering customers with essential account information.

Revamping our website and our recently re-launched MyViya app will improve the customer journey, making it easier for our customers to find their balance and access essential account information. This user-friendly interface will empower our customers to take control of their accounts with minimal effort.

These proactive changes are designed to reduce call volumes, leading to the reshaping of the organization and significantly improving our customer service experience. By empowering our customers with the tools and information they need, we aim to create a more seamless and efficient support system that meets and exceeds their expectations.



Status Of Present Infrastructure Projects And Plans For Future Development

Over the past few months, Viya has made significant progress in various infrastructure initiatives aimed at delivering reliable products and services to the people of the Virgin Islands.

- ViFiber: Central to our strategy is the ViFiber program, which has seen the deployment of fiber deeper into our network, enabling the provision of 1Gbps internet service to most parts of the Territory. Furthermore, any business requesting fiber connectivity can now access it, with the majority benefitting from unprecedented upload speeds of 400Mbps.
- FTTP- Fiber To The Premise: Viya has commenced the deployment of FTTP in key business districts and neighborhoods with further details on these plans to be communicated in the near future.
- Viya Mobile: On the mobile front, ***Viya is on track to complete the deployment of 5G this year***, with a network boasting 40% more cell sites in the VI than our closest competitor, ensuring superior speeds and coverage. Our 5G deployment is part of our ongoing commitment to deliver the highest quality mobile network service to our customers, including seamless connectivity beyond the US Virgin Islands to most Caribbean islands, mainland United States, Canada, and Mexico.

- **Switch Your Network, Keep Your Number:** Viya has been actively promoting the ability for residents to keep their USVI, Puerto Rico, or stateside numbers when switching to Viya as part of our efforts to affirm the VI identity and address confusion in the market about porting from your current provider.
- **Viya TV+:** The transition to our enhanced High-Definition cable television platform, Viya TV+, is nearing completion, providing customers with an enhanced all-digital viewing experience. With new technology comes challenges for the provider of the service, as well as customers. Notwithstanding those challenges, providers like Viya must keep pace with the rest of the world and constantly strive to find the right balance between the choice of technology, new programming choices, prices, and customer centricity so that we can deliver high value to the customer.
- **Viya is Connected to the Community:** Viya's engagement with the people of the Virgin Islands extends beyond our storefronts. Viya consistently provides impactful support to our community by collaborating with key stakeholders on important initiatives for the Virgin Islands. Viya partners with community leaders and government agencies to determine ways that connectivity and collaboration can spur development and support important matters and initiatives like disaster preparedness, cybersecurity, workforce development, economic development, food sovereignty, and Virgin Islands' culture.



External Challenges To Viya's Operations

In addition to technological enhancements, we are making infrastructure upgrades to ensure uninterrupted service for our customers. This includes investing in backup power for all our nodes and most cell sites, segregating Viya network downtime from commercial power issues perpetually impacting the US Virgin Islands.

Commercial Power

Frequent power outages and surges have a detrimental effect on customer-premise equipment like modems and cable converters that we are now required to replace at a rate that outpaces similar telecom operations, negatively impacts our bottom line and harms the company's reputation. Frequent power fluctuations shorten the lifespan of electronic equipment, leading to increased wear and tear and potential premature failure.

Commercial Power outages obviously interrupt the power supply to the equipment, causing service disruption until power is restored. We know that many residents do not have a backup power supply; thus, it has been crucial for us to continue to invest in backup power to ensure that residents continue to have service. We have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in this initiative, which remains critical to our network maintenance plan. This has been a financial drain on Viya like most businesses in the Territory.



Affordable Connectivity Remains A Critical Issue

Viya continues to be the only provider actively working to bridge the digital divide in Virgin Islands communities. One of the major initiatives for bridging the digital divide is the federally subsidized Affordable Connectivity Program, which provides residents who qualify, with a \$30 per month subsidy for broadband service. That's why Viya has invested tens of thousands of dollars and a significant number of resources in our daily community outreach efforts to promote the ACP at cultural events, expos, and strategic locations where our community gathers. ACP is a critical part of our conversation in the community because the cost of connectivity should not be a barrier to access. Our outreach efforts are extensive and collaborative.

Earlier this month, the FCC announced that funding for the ACP will cease to exist by the end of April 2024 due to lack of funding. Prospects for additional appropriations are not good since it will require bipartisan Congressional action. This is going to be very disruptive to the Virgin Islands as more than 5,000 households are enrolled in the ACP.

Tomorrow, as required by the Federal Communications Commission, Viya will be sending the required notice to its more than 3,000 ACP customers that the program is running out of money and will cease in April. This is going to cause tremendous concern for ACP participants as they are faced with losing the \$30 per month subsidy they rely on to maintain their broadband service.



Viya has been warning about the possibility of this occurring and we have previously circulated a white paper to Chairman Blyden and members of the Committee describing how the monies from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA) Broadband, Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program can be used to provide all Virgin Islanders with 100Mbps broadband service using a methodology similar to the ACP program. We have met with Director O'Neal of the Office of Management and Budget, and other stakeholders to provide NTIA with a strategic proposal for the BEAD monies. Because that process is administered by OMB and is not public, there has not been any transparency around the submitted proposal, but it is critically important that the BEAD money (or some other source of funding) is used to sustain broadband availability for all Virgin Islanders. If we do nothing, all carriers will stop taking new ACP customers on February 7, 2024, and all existing ACP customers will see their subsidy end at the end of April 2024.

Currently, 5,000 Virgin Islanders receiving \$30 per month in subsidy totals \$150,000 per month or \$1.8M per year. With all the broadband and infrastructure funding the Territory has received between the American Rescue Plan that was passed during COVID and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, I urge the members of the 35th Legislature to find the funds needed now to continue the ACP program at the local level to ensure that Virgin Islanders stay connected.



As I previously mentioned, Viya must send the notice out tomorrow about the end of the ACP program. I have no doubt ACP participants will call members of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands with their concerns and we encourage this body to work with providers to determine a viable solution to address the gap that will be created when the ACP ceases. Further notices must be sent to our customers in February and March, and we would like to be able to advise customers, in those subsequent notices, that the 35th Legislature collaborated with Viya and other stakeholders to identify a viable solution to the impending subsidy gap.

Viya is ready to work with the members of this august body to develop a plan to address the digital divide, but time is of the essence. We must act now, or customers are going to experience a crippling loss of broadband service within the next three months.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am honored to represent Viya and our dedicated employees before this esteemed committee. Their hard work, dedication and commitment to the community have been pivotal to Viya's success, and I am confident that Viya will continue to be the leading local service provider in the Virgin Islands. With a focus on technological advancements, exceptional customer experience, and a customer-centric approach, I am



optimistic about Viya's future and its role in leading the Virgin Islands Telecommunications Sector forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony.