



**TESTIMONY OF GERALDINE PITT, CEO OF VIYA
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION AND
TELECOMMUNICATIONS
October 3, 2023**

Honorable Chairman Marvin Blyden, Members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, members of the 35th Legislature and their staff, and the listening and viewing audience, my name is Geraldine Pitt, and I am the Chief Executive Officer for the Virgin Islands Telephone Corporation, known locally as Viya. Thank you for inviting me to testify on the status and future of telecommunications in the Territory and Viya's overarching goal of keeping the community connected.

A Winning, Customer-First Mindset

When we last appeared before this committee six months ago, we spent much time discussing infrastructure, speeds, and other critical aspects of the business. Later in my testimony, I will address those elements of Viya's operations. Let's begin today with the most critical element in Viya's operations, Customer Support.

As Viya prepares for 2024, our mission is to reinforce a winning, customer-first mindset in order to solidify our operating model and deliver on our customer promise. Every decision that we make is from the vantage point of putting the customer first and providing

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quality customer care and first-time resolution. Part of this effort involves difficult decisions about Viya's existing approach to Customer Care. How do we know that we must improve? Our customers told us.

This summer, Viya conducted an extensive study that included qualitative and quantitative data from more than 400 residential and 100 business customers throughout the Territory. While customers noted improvements in the brand, community engagement, and overall customer experience, the audit of all Viya's communication and technology solutions revealed one consistent fact: the key area of improvement identified was customer support. We have spent a significant amount of time and resources delving into the customer journey, analyzing customer pain points, and determining how to make the customer's interaction with Viya simple and seamless.

Our customers demand that we radically change how we support them. I have mentioned Customer Care several times in this testimony, but let me be clear. When I use the term Customer Care, I am not speaking about the call center. I am speaking about the entire organization.

The current segmented model is not helpful to the customer. Customers want to be able to book their own appointments and manage their engagement with Viya. Customers would prefer to have a seamless experience that does not require trips to the Retail Store. They want us to solve all their issues the first time they are raised.



They want to know in real time when an issue in their area may affect their service. And they want to know when that issue is resolved. In other words, customers want us to be proactive and responsive.

For too long, we have managed the company based on job descriptions and classifications rooted in the legacy telephone company operations from 50 years ago, which is no longer suitable for communication solutions providers in a competitive environment.

As every Virgin Islander knows, commerce and customer service have migrated online. For Viya to remain competitive in this market, we must commit to a complete, robust online experience for our customers. This month, we will be launching a new version of the Viya App with greater functionality and exclusive content features that only Viya customers will be able to access. Customers will be able to seamlessly interact with Viya through the app and our retail stores. In essence, we strive to provide a reliable service that will ensure that Customers do not have to contact us often, and when they do, the experience will be exceptional.

This current operating model makes it challenging for us to deliver on our customers' expectations and keep our promises. We have made numerous changes over the last five years to improve the customer experience. Today, we are better and more efficient than we were before Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. We are, however, past the stage



where a series of small changes will amount to excellence. 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 that organizational changes are needed 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 all must move forward for the benefit of the people of the Virgin Islands.

Status of present infrastructure projects and plans for future development

In the months since I last appeared before this Committee, Viya has executed several of the initiatives I previewed for you then, all aimed at delivering improved products and services to Virgin Islanders.

- At the center of our strategy is a program named VI Fiber because ***at Viya, the Virgin Islands come first.*** Viya deployed fiber deeper into our network and now offers 1Gbps Internet service to most of the Territory.

Any business that requests fiber connectivity can have it today, and most can have it with 400Mbps upload speeds, an unprecedented speed in the Virgin Islands.



- FTTP- Fiber To The Premise

We have started to deploy FTTP to key business districts, and our customers will learn more about our plans in the near future.

- Continuing on the mobile side, ***Viya is on track to deploy 5G this year as planned.*** With 40% more cell sites in the VI than our closest competitor, we are confident that our network will deliver superior speeds. Our 5G deployment is part of our continuing effort to ensure that our mobile network delivers the highest quality service to our customers. Moreover, customers can stay connected in most Caribbean islands, the mainland United States, Canada and Mexico. Viya mobile has made enormous strides, as customers are experiencing for themselves the speed and coverage of our network. Customers enjoy reliable mobile and Mi-Fi functionality. Further, Viya customers, when traveling to the mainland, now have access to two national carriers. This is a significant development for Viya and our customers. Now you can understand why we say Viya is the Number 1 Mobile network in the Virgin Islands Period!
- Keep Your Number and Switch Your Network! This summer H20 and other providers advised their customers that they had to acquire a new off-island telephone number to keep their service. For the last two years, Viya has executed an extensive media campaign advising our community that they can keep any USVI, Puerto Rico, or stateside number that they currently have by porting to Viya

for free. There was a great deal of confusion in the market, and we were the primary provider advising customers of their options and reminding them that they could keep their number if they ported to Viya, because 340 is a part of your VI identity.

- We are in the final phase of fully converting our legacy cable television platform to an HD platform, Viya TV+[®]. TV+ customers enjoy an enhanced viewing experience. TV+ provides ***an-all digital experience for our customers***. 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.
- Our engagement with the community extends beyond our storefronts. More importantly, Viya partners with other stakeholders in the community to discuss the relationship between connectivity and important matters and initiatives like disaster preparedness, cybersecurity, workforce development, economic development, food sovereignty and Virgin Islands culture. Viya consistently provides impactful support to our community by collaborating with key stakeholders on important initiatives to the Virgin Islands.



Bridging The Digital Divide

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 connectivity. Our outreach efforts are extensive, and collaborative.

High-speed broadband service in the Territory presents challenges of affordability that are similar to the housing market. Despite all the efforts of the government to provide public housing, the cost of housing remains a big challenge for many people. Access to broadband is no different than access to housing; they are both necessities that affect the quality of life.

Viya has begun circulating a white paper on subsidy to key stakeholders, including members of this Committee. Our white paper explains how such support can be structured so that all residents of the Virgin Islands receive minimum 100 Mbps Internet, for a fraction of the cost to the government. Were the government to use part of the



\$27 million in available Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) money from the federal government for this purpose, the government could fund this program for many years.

I hope we can work with the government and key stakeholders to bring this program to market and close the digital divide in our community. The US Virgin Islands is uniquely positioned to take the leading role in the United States as the first place to provide 100 Mbps to residents by subsidizing connectivity.

Reshaping The Business- Around The Customer

Viya's investments in technology and people are part of a larger effort to reshape the business so that Viya can keep the U.S. Virgin Islands connected and deliver additional advanced services and solutions to meet customers' foremost needs. This Committee knows that Viya's Universal Service Funding has been materially reduced and that there is more competition than ever in the Territory. To navigate these challenges, Viya is diligently accelerating our investments in technology and reshaping our organization. This is a continuous process as Viya must adapt to market circumstances to remain the leading and only local telecommunications provider in the Territory. Our competitors are some of the largest carriers in the industry with global operations who can take advantage of their economies of scale and optimize their cost



structure across multiple countries. Yet, Viya remains the largest telecommunications employer in the Virgin Islands.

We are proud of the team that has built Viya over the years and to be sustainable, Viya must continue to seek ways to improve the cost structure of the business. This will inevitably affect all aspects of the business as we change our operating model. Change is uncomfortable and disruptive, but we must continue to evaluate where we are and adjust to changes in technology and customer demands.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am proud to represent Viya's employees before you today. It is only through their hard work, dedication, and commitment to the community that Viya is successful, and I am confident that Viya will remain the leading local service provider in the Virgin Islands.

Technological advancements and evolving customer demands necessitate a robust and modernized network infrastructure supported by exceptional customer experience. I am optimistic that our future is bright, that Viya will continue to lead the Virgin Island Telecommunications Sector into the future. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to present my testimony.