

**PREPARED STATEMENT OF  
JAUGHNA NIELSEN-BOBBIT, DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL EQUITY  
AND INCLUSION FOR THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS  
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON  
HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION, INFRASTRUCTURE &  
TELECOMMUNICATIONS  
35<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS  
August 28, 2024**

Good Afternoon, Honorable Marvin A. Blyden, Honorable Senators, and the listening and viewing audiences. I am Jaughna Nielsen-Bobbit, the Director of Digital Equity and Inclusion for the U.S. Virgin Islands housed under viNGN. To echo Mr. Adams's sentiments, I am honored to present to you today the status of the federally funded Digital Equity (DE) Planning, Capacity, and Competitive Grants in the Territory.

The COVID pandemic laid bare some uncomfortable truths. One of these truths is that many Americans, including many of us here in the Virgin Islands, do not have access to *affordable* high-speed internet, nor the devices or skills required to fully participate in education, health care, the workforce, and society more broadly. To address this, the Biden-Harris Administration launched the multibillion-dollar Internet For All Initiative. Under this program, funding has been allocated to all States and Territories to address access to affordable internet, affordable devices, and skills development. It is the latter two – devices and skills – that the Digital Equity grants are earmarked to tackle and, on behalf of the Territory, viNGN applied for, and is now managing and administering, the Digital Equity grant in the USVI.

The first of these grants is the Digital Equity Planning Grant funded by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration or NTIA. Under this grant, viNGN spent the past year using a participatory community approach

to develop a Digital Equity Plan for the Territory. The plan outlines the current state of internet access and assets in the USVI, as well as goals, strategies, and metrics for how to make the Territory more “digitally resilient” with regards to affordable devices and computer skills. The plan was approved in late-June by the NTIA, and the final version will be disseminated widely over the coming weeks. Now that the Territory has a plan in place, the next step is to secure the first tranche of funding to implement the activities in the plan, which is called the USVI Digital Equity Plan or USVIDEP. Funding is, again, available from the NTIA under the Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program and, on behalf of the Territory, viNGN applied in July for the \$2.1M allocated for each of the four American territories this fiscal year. Currently, viNGN is working with the NTIA to get the Territory’s application accepted. Once approved and awarded, the majority of this funding will be available to community organizations and local government agencies with programs that directly serve the community via an open and transparent sub-granting process, which viNGN will publish and share over the coming weeks.

In addition to the Digital Equity Capacity Grant, the NTIA has just released the Notice of Funding Opportunity for the Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program. Under the Competitive Grant Program any entity – public, private or non-profit – can submit an innovative proposal on how to improve access to affordable internet, affordable devices, and/or computer skills for funding consideration. viNGN has disseminated this opportunity to the Territory’s Digital Equity partners and will also apply for the grant to receive additional funding for the USVIDEP.

My testimony today is also a public announcement for any entity interested in applying for funding consideration under the Digital Equity Competitive grant to

download the Notice of Funding Opportunity or NOFO from [www.ntia.gov](http://www.ntia.gov) and get involved.

In sum, last year was about planning, this year is about securing the funding to implement the Territory's plan, and next year is about rolling out Digital Equity initiatives across the VI via proven community partners.

This concludes my portion of viNGN's testimony. I look forward to answering any questions. Thank you for your time and attention.

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