



**TESTIMONY OF GERALDINE PITT, CEO OF VIYA
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION AND
TELECOMMUNICATIONS
August 28, 2024**

Honorable Chairman Marvin Blyden, Members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications, esteemed members of the 35th Legislature and their staff, and attentive audience members, I am Geraldine Pitt, honored to appear before you today as the Chief Executive Officer of 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, and to discuss Viya's primary goal of keeping our community connected.

Preparations and readiness in terms of ensuring that the telecommunications networks remain functioning or can rapidly resume operations in the event of a severe weather event

Today marks two weeks since Tropical Storm Ernesto passed. I am grateful that our community was spared a worse fate. Thanks to the resiliency efforts we've implemented over the past two years, many customers maintained service throughout the storm. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to our dedicated team, who worked tirelessly before, during, and after the storm to maintain and restore connectivity. Although Viya's network was fully operational within 72 hours, some customers experienced intermittent service. We apologize for the inconvenience to those who lost service for an extended period and made every effort to restore service as quickly and safely as possible to keep our customers connected.

While Viya's network remained online, prolonged power outages impacted our backup power supplies. Our technicians worked diligently to refuel these power supplies

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regularly, replenish fuel, replace burnt equipment, restore tripped breakers, and replace downed lines.

Throughout this process, Viya provided updates on the status of the restoration and Viya's operations on local radio stations, social media and local print and online periodicals. Viya also provided updates throughout each day to Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) and the Business Emergency Operations Center (BEOC) to ensure the appropriate level of collaboration with our local and Federal partners.

Viya has a comprehensive Disaster Recovery Plan that we continuously update. The plan is on record at the Virgin Islands Public Services Commission. Throughout the hurricane season, Viya sends regular reminders to our customers via all media regarding preparations, safety tips, and best practices. To ensure that our team is prepared, Viya also partners with the American Red Cross to conduct hurricane preparedness training for our employees.

Viya has an extensive array of generators deployed to contend with the regular power outages of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority ("WAPA"). Viya supports these generators with internal personnel and outside contractors for maintenance and fuel supply. We have learned from the last storm and put measures in place for quick restoration. Due to the challenges with reliable power in the Territory, Viya has made great strides in upgrading and reinforcing its power infrastructure. Predictive measures are embedded in the infrastructure, so we are more proactive when outages occur.

Viya's resiliency initiatives include partnering with the VI Water and Power Authority and Haughland Energy to replace traditional utility poles with composite ones. These transfers are largely coordinated across all three islands, with Viya following WAPA.

Status Of Present Infrastructure Projects and Plans for Future Development-

Since our last appearance before this august body, 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, most businesses requesting fiber connectivity can now access it, with the majority benefitting from unprecedented upload speeds of up to 400Mbps.
- Viya Mobile: On the mobile front, Viya successfully completed the deployment of 5G in May, with a network boasting 40% more cell sites in the VI than our closest competitor, ensuring superior speeds and coverage. Our 5G deployment was a key 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.
- **Number Portability- Switch Your Network, Keep Your Number:** Viya has actively promoted 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. For several months, customers who were porting from our competitor, Liberty, were challenged with their number being “hung-up” in the system and customers were unable to port successfully and seamlessly. The Viya team essentially had to escalate the tickets and an activity that should take minutes often took days. The issue finally appears to have been resolved with the cooperation of Liberty.

- 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.

Affordable Connectivity Program Ceases, Viya Continues Discounts with Lifeline

Viya has been the primary provider actively working to bridge the digital divide in Virgin Islands communities. One of the major initiatives for bridging the digital divide was the federally subsidized Affordable Connectivity Program, which provided residents who qualify, with a \$30 per month subsidy for broadband service. From March 2022, Viya 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 was a critical part of our conversation in the community because the cost of connectivity should not be a barrier to access. Our outreach efforts were extensive and collaborative.

In January, the FCC announced that funding for the ACP would cease to exist by the end of May 2024 due to lack of funding. We anticipated that this would be very disruptive to the Virgin Islands as more than 5,000 households were enrolled in the ACP. At our last appearance before this committee, we were the only provider that addressed the loss of the ACP and the possible impact on the Territory. From January 25, 2024, Viya began



sending the required notices to its more than 3,500 ACP customers that the program is running out of money and will cease operations in May.

During and after the decision by Congress to discontinue the Affordable Connectivity Program, Viya continued working with our key partners, like the Department of Human Services and The Virgin Islands Housing Authority, to ensure that all ACP recipients receive continued access to discounted services. Exemplifying our commitment to ensure our valued customers utilizing this program remain connected, Viya has continued to provide a direct subsidy to these subscribers, and intends to continue to do so until October, thus providing an additional six months of relief and the opportunity to enroll with the federally funded Lifeline program.

As the wind-down of the ACP neared, customers were urged to watch for communications from Viya. Since February, Viya has been conducting an ongoing campaign that includes calls, emails, SMS and WhatsApp messages to our customers enrolled in the ACP. These communications provided detailed information and helpful resources about the decision by Congress to end the program, available discounts on select services, and eligibility for the federally subsidized Lifeline program. Additionally, customers can visit Viya's website at Viya.vi/ACPupdate for the latest updates and assistance options.

Viya has also continued to advocate for the renewal of funding for the ACP, whether federal or local, and work towards a long-term solution to support families most in need. The \$1.8M annually that was subsidized allowed 5,000 families in the Virgin Islands to have reliable connectivity for education, employment, and entertainment and has helped the USVI to move forward in the digital age.



Viya proactively sought out alternative subsidies before the announcement of the end of ACP. 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 Governor Albert Bryan, Jr., the leadership of the Office of Management and Budget, and other stakeholders and provided NTIA with a strategic proposal for the BEAD monies. Viya maintains that it is critically important that the BEAD money (or some other source of funding) is used to sustain broadband affordability for all Virgin Islanders.

Viya believes that the primary challenge with broadband access is affordability, not availability. The need for a subsidy was evident during the ACP engagement, which served over 5,000 customers. These participants require home connectivity now, rather than additional public hot spots in the future. It would be wise to allocate a portion of the \$27 million to deliver broadband directly to residents today rather than ask them to sit in a park or public space to access the Internet.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is a privilege to represent Viya and our dedicated team before this distinguished committee. The hard work, dedication, and commitment of our employees have been instrumental to Viya's success. I am confident that Viya will continue to lead as the premier local service provider in the Virgin Islands. With our focus on technological innovation, exceptional customer service, and a customer-first approach, I am optimistic about Viya's future and its pivotal role in advancing the telecommunications sector in the Virgin Islands. Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony.