

Virgin Islands Housing Authority
Semi-Autonomous Agency

TELECOMMUNICATION PRESENTATION

36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

**Committee on Housing, Transportation,
and Telecommunications**



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**Director, Resident Wellness
and Empowerment**

Introductions

Good morning, Honorable Senator Marvin A. Blyden, Chairman of the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications; Vice-Chair Clifford A. Joseph; and Senators Dwayne M. DeGraff; Ray Fonseca; Marise C. James, and Carla J. Joseph. Good morning to all other distinguished Senators present today, esteemed legislative staff, the citizens of the Virgin Islands, the dedicated employees of the Virgin Islands Housing Authority, and the public listening in.

My name is Emmanuella Perez-Cassius, Director of Resident Wellness and Empowerment at the Virgin Islands Housing Authority. I appear before you today on behalf of Executive Director Dwayne Alexander, who experienced unexpected travel challenges returning to the Territory. However, VIHA understands the importance of this discussion, and we did not want the realities of the residents we serve to be absent from this conversation.

It is both privilege and responsibility to appear before you today on behalf of the Virgin Islands Housing Authority and our dedicated team of 172 employees. Their steadfast commitment and relentless efforts in service to our communities are truly commendable and warrant our utmost appreciation and recognition.

For VIHA, connectivity is not only a quality-of-life issue, but also a workforce and economic participation issue. As more employment, education, and services move online, reliable broadband access has become essential for residents to engage in job training, employment opportunities, and self-sufficiency programs.

At the outset, VIHA's position is clear: internet access is no longer a luxury, it is an essential service and for low-income households, it must be both accessible and affordable. We support solutions that expand access to every household while ensuring costs remain low and do not increase the financial burden on residents.

It is important to distinguish that VIHA serves low-income households, not general affordable housing. The families we serve include those living below federal income thresholds, working families who still struggle to meet basic expenses, seniors, and persons with disabilities. For these households, even modest increases in monthly expenses create real hardship. In the Virgin Islands, basic internet plans range from approximately \$50 to \$70 per month, mid-range broadband from \$80 to \$120, and high-speed services can exceed \$120 to \$180 per month. When combined with rent, utilities, and daily living expenses, even the lowest tier becomes difficult to sustain.

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) demonstrated what is possible when targeted support is in place. However, when federal funding ended in April 2024, many households immediately lost access to affordable internet and were forced to disconnect. While programs like ACP proved that targeted assistance works, VIHA's position is that we must widen the net. Some working families did not qualify, yet still struggled, while households with school-aged children and senior residents saw clear benefits when connectivity was available.

This is directly connected to our broader work. Through our Section 3 Program and Bright Path initiative, we are actively working to connect residents to employment, training, and long-term economic opportunity. Reliable internet access is a necessary component of that pathway, supporting job applications, virtual training, and access to services that promote self-sufficiency.

Today, while many households may have access to a cell phone, which is different from having reliable home internet, and not every household can consistently afford even that level of service. No family should be forced to choose between keeping the lights on and paying for Wi-Fi. VIHA already provides utility allowances; however, those allowances may decrease based on household size and often do not fully cover the actual cost of utilities due to the high cost of energy in the Territory. Our goal is to put residents in a better position, not add to their financial strain.

VIHA supports solutions that are sustainable and aligned with broader economic and workforce development goals. If the Legislature were to consider a local subsidy model, a targeted approach in the range of \$40 to \$60 per household per month could create a pathway to broader access, particularly when paired with provider partnerships and existing federal programs. If the legislature were to consider a local subsidy model of approximately \$40 to \$60 per household per month for roughly 1,700 households could create a sustainable pathway to universal access. This would represent an estimated investment of \$816,000 to \$1.2M over 12 months. Especially when paired with provider agreements and existing federal programs. VIHA stands ready to assist in implementation and ensure equitable access across all communities.

This issue is about more than connectivity. Reliable internet supports education, employment, and access to healthcare, and participation in an increasingly digital economy. Chairman Blyden and members of the Committee, the loss of ACP showed us that access can be achieved, but also how quickly it can be lost. We now have an opportunity to build sustainable and inclusive approach, one that supports, not only connectivity, but economic participation and long-term stability for the residents we serve. At VIHA, we remain committed to ensuring that no resident is left behind as the Territory moves forward.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions.