

Image not found or type unknown

Frett-Gregory Defends Referral of Heritage Wireless to Dept. of Education, Calls Proposal “Golden Opportunity” As ACP Signup Deadline Looms

Amid rising scrutiny, Frett-Gregory emphasizes student benefits in face of ACP program closure

Government / **Published On February 02, 2024 06:27 AM /**

Janeka Simon **February 02, 2024**

Image not found or type unknown



Senator Donna Frett-Gregory sought to distance herself from Heritage Wireless, the company she connected with the Dept. of Education for the ACP program.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory says she does not have any affiliation whatsoever with Heritage Wireless, the company at the center of a firestorm of attention following an announcement from the V.I. Dept. of Education of a new initiative under the soon-to-expire Affordable Connectivity Program.

Last Saturday, the D.O.E. announced a [partnership](#) – in their words – with Heritage Wireless to provide free devices to qualifying students under the ACP. The initial press release omitted key details, including information that the program benefits would soon expire if the ACP were not renewed, and that they were available from other service providers as well. The press release also linked to a since-updated application form specific to Heritage Wireless, and praised Senator Frett-Gregory for “her invaluable support and for her role in establishing the connection with Heritage Wireless.”

The move quickly drew scrutiny from the offices of at [least two lawmakers](#), who raised several questions about how the decision was taken to partner with this company. Consortium journalists then learned that the president and sole director of Heritage Wireless Bobbi Alston seems to be the same person as Corey Alston, who has a [history of criminal convictions](#) and civil lawsuits against him for fraudulent activity dating back as far as 2013.

Consortium journalists have been trying to reach Education officials and Senator Frett-Gregory since Monday to learn more about the announced partnership, particularly about the vetting process that took place before the decision was made to move forward.

On Wednesday, the Department of Education issued another press release [walking back their association](#) with Heritage Wireless while saying nothing about the circumstances which led to their initial announcement. On Thursday afternoon, Senator Frett-Gregory issued a press release of her own.

Although she did not name the Consortium in her release, referring only to “an article published in an online media source,” this publication was, until Thursday, the only one to report on the matter. “There was no communication with me...before the publication of the story,” Senator Frett-Gregory went on to state, hours after acknowledging the publication’s several attempts to contact her.

She went on to distance herself from association with the scandal-plagued Alston and his newly-formed company, saying that Heritage Wireless reached out to her directly. “I have no prior or existing business, family, or other relationship with Heritage Wireless, its officers, directors, or employees,” her statement indicated.

Frett-Gregory did not provide information regarding why the company, which she claims she had no prior knowledge of, chose to contact her and not lawmakers whose committees have jurisdiction over either education or telecommunications. In fact, these senators — Marvin Blyden, who chairs the Committee Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, and Senator Marise James, who chairs the Committee on Education and Workforce Development — raised several questions about how the decision was made to partner with Heritage Wireless.

Additionally, Education officials themselves reportedly noted in a recent meeting with Mr. Blyden that the department had been approached by Liberty some years ago, with Viya representatives reportedly claiming that they too had reached out to the department and been ignored.

Noting that the ACP is federally administered, Ms. Frett-Gregory stated that participating companies are vetted and approved by the FCC. However, there has been rampant reports of ACP fraud, and a recent report from the Government Accountability Office [chastised the FCC for its lack of fraud controls](#) for the ACP program. Taking advantage of this weakness, several providers have been found to have fraudulently claimed program reimbursements using various methods, including enrolling the same benefit qualifying person in multiple households. The ACP limits the benefit — either a device or discount on broadband service — to one per household. Other

providers [have been accused](#) of predatory sales tactics and misleading offers.

The lawmaker also noted that despite funding for the ACP set to run out before the middle of the year, those who register and qualify for the device benefit will get to keep the tablet after the program expires. Additionally, she notes that efforts are currently underway in Congress to extend the program. The FCC will stop accepting ACP applications on Feb. 7 — five days from now.

Citing the rapidly approaching deadline for applications, the senator argued that “rather than let this golden opportunity for our students pass by, I put Heritage Wireless in touch with the Department of Education leadership to figure out what, if anything could be done in the time remaining.”

Chiding the publication’s editorial decisions, the senator declared that “yesterday’s article should have focused on the incredible opportunity to get cutting edge technology into the hands of students who may otherwise be unable to report it.” Should Wednesday’s article have done so, it would have only been a repetition of information that was already disseminated on the platform five days earlier, while neglecting important questions raised in light of Heritage Wireless’s links with Corey Alston.

Rather than grapple with the implications of blindly forwarding inquiries that come across her desks to government agencies who may or may not do any vetting of our own, the lawmaker declared that she would “never apologize for going the extra mile to give children in the Virgin Islands a chance to catch up, keep up, or get ahead.”