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Virgin Islands Residents Pay the Price for WAPA's Power Failures With Costly Appliance Losses

Multiple households suffer severe financial strain as frequent outages lead to extensive damage to essential home appliances, forcing residents to bear unexpected high costs

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After losing a refrigerator, washing machine, air conditioner and television all within the last month and a half due to frequent power outages from the Water and Power Authority, a pastor and St. Thomas resident turned to the utility for support. The pastor, who asked that his name not be disclosed, described a disappointing response from a WAPA electrician. “One person told me, ‘you think you in the States?’ That was an answer.”

The employee informed the resident of the authority's long standing policy of not being liable to its customers for personal losses caused by irregular services— a disclaimer written in the contract

for service on every customer's monthly electric bill. The resident was then forced to turn to his own pocket, paying what he estimated to be around \$5,000 for the appliances, which he described as necessities that he “can’t do without.”

“I got such a big setback because I have to do what I have to do. I have savings but yet now I can't take my vacation that I wanted. I can't go here when I wanted. I can't even go have a good dinner,” the resident said, explaining the personal implications of being financially responsible for the damage caused by the recent outages and fluctuations. This additional unplanned expenditure comes on top of having to pay monthly electric bills which are almost three times higher than the U.S. average.?

For many other Virgin Islanders who rely on WAPA for power, the pastor’s experience of managing the additional expense of ruined appliances, allegedly as a result of the utility’s services yet without support from the utility, has been a personal burden for decades. However, the recent weeks of power outages, instability, and rotations have led to an increase in appliance damage and other personal expenses for customers of WAPA, especially those on St. Thomas and St. John.?

Not even Governor Albert Bryan Jr. has been spared. During Monday’s press briefing, he described having to replace “two stoves and a fridge” as a result of WAPA’s recent power instability. However, in a statement to the Consortium, WAPA Director of Communications Shannell Petersen said the authority would continue to stand by its policy of not accepting liability for damage to customer items caused by its sub-par electricity supply. Ms. Peterson, however, did express empathy with community members as they try to fit the expense of replacing ruined appliances into already-strained household budgets.

For the Executive Director of the Public Services Commission Sandra Setorie, however, mere empathy may not be enough anymore. Reached for comment by Consortium journalists, Ms. Setorie said that the “continued propriety of this policy” may be reviewed by the Commission.”

Despite WAPA’s stated policy absolving itself from liability, the utility does offer customers the opportunity to complete a “Claim for Damages” online. The information collected, WAPA says, will be used to “process” and “investigate” personal damages. However Margaret Price, a St. Thomas resident who says she has lost a refrigerator and three microwaves due to WAPA, said that [the form’s location](#) – at the bottom of the “Forms” page of WAPA’s website – is deliberately obscure, and that many residents are unaware of the form’s existence.

Gilly, a St. Thomas resident who asked not to disclose her last name, also told Consortium journalists—[during the ‘Enough is Enough’ WAPA protest on Monday](#)—that residents are often unaware of the processes available to customers seeking compensation from WAPA. “I had to take them to court and I received my refrigerator. A lot of people on the island don’t know their rights. I do,” said Gilly, who added that her lawsuit years ago against WAPA for a damaged refrigerator had been successful.?

Colin Lloyd, an employee for a St. John property management company which has lost an appliance at four of their houses in the past week, said he has not contacted WAPA about the damages because he believes it would be difficult to prove that they are a result of outages from the authority. “After long days, eight days that are extended due to running around to extra houses and then getting home [and] not having power—so not being able to shower or not wanting to open the fridge, so you got to plan ahead, you don't want to let any cold out—it's pretty frustrating,” Mr. Lloyd said, describing the stress of ensuring that the properties have power while at work, while also fretting that when he gets home, his house would be without electricity.

Kelly Larkin, who also manages properties on St. John, said that she was also under extreme stress from grappling with the effects of WAPA's recent outages. Larkin said she lost an air conditioning unit and a pool pump at one of her properties. Compounding her stress was when the internet battery backups and cell tower backups went down due to outages, leaving her unable to communicate with guests and employees. "I was a walking zombie for many days for so many reasons," Ms. Larkin wrote in a message to the Consortium.?

For the St. Thomas pastor, the uncertainty imposed by WAPA—of not knowing when the power will be off again and if another appliance will be damaged—is his largest stress from the utility. "So you got to change your whole life situation around WAPA. It feel like we in prison," he said.

While Clarence Payne, the lead organizer in Monday's 'Enough is Enough' [protest on St. Thomas](#), said that he has not experienced any appliance damage, his budget has been taxed by the need to purchase fuel for his propane generator – \$360 worth in the last week alone. The generator is already almost empty, he says. Mr. Payne described the scenario faced by WAPA consumers as "somebody driving on the highway in a car crashing into your car, and then you have no recourse, through no fault of your own."

Mr. Payne argues that WAPA should at least offer customers the differential of the appliances that may have lost value after years of depreciation. "But to absolutely ignore what you have done, that is so wrong on so many levels," Mr. Payne said about the utility's current policy. For Ms. Price, the lack of support she has received from WAPA is hypocritical given [the \\$4 million the authority owes to BMR Energy](#), in addition to its other staggering debts to vendors and service providers. "Make WAPA start being accountable for their own bills," Ms. Price said.?

While Ms. Price said she does not allow the additional expenses caused by WAPA outages to create personal stress, the St. Thomas pastor said that his mental and financial stress from WAPA are so great that he has considered leaving the island. The community at his church, however, grounds him in St. Thomas, even through the authority's instability and the uncertainty it brings to his everyday life. "I'm only here because of them," he said.