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Customer Complaints Surge as Meter Failures and Estimated Billing at WAPA Persists

As customer complaints over faulty meters and inflated estimated bills rise, WAPA begins replacing meters with manual-read units and increases staffing, while awaiting FEMA's \$138 million grant for a comprehensive metering system overhaul

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During a PSC board meeting on Tuesday, Assistant Executive Director of the Public Services Commission, Tisean Hendricks, reported a surge in customer complaints and inquiries regarding various service issues with the V.I. Water and Power Authority. Complaints have been received through multiple channels, including online, over the phone, by mail, and in person. “We have also noticed customers expressing concerns on social media platforms,” she noted.

“The Virgin Islands Public Services Commission has witnessed a significant increase in customer complaints and inquiries regarding various service issues with the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority,” said Ms. Hendricks. Most concerns center around the chronic problem of perceived overbilling, where estimated bills are unusually higher than those based on actual meter readings. She also highlighted other major issues, including “non-responding meters and solar or net billing concerns.”

“The PSC is extremely concerned with the volume and the nature of complaints we have received within the last two months,” she continued, noting 44 complaints and inquiries from St. Croix, and 134 emanating from the St. Thomas/St. John district. This, Ms. Hendricks concluded, signals that the bulk of the issue is occurring in the latter district.

The elevated complaint numbers come after the PSC initiated a solicitation campaign at the beginning of September targeted at consumers, urging them to ensure their voices are heard by lodging official complaints.

Despite the influx of responses, Ms. Hendricks said that “the PSC investigation of this matter is a bit premature,” however she believed commissioners should know about “the customer service issues we continue to face daily.” She pledged to continue collating data, with PSC staffers continuing to respond, alongside WAPA’s customer service team, to incoming complaints and enquiries.

WAPA’s interim Chief Financial Officer, Lorraine Kelly, reminded PSC commissioners that the problems with WAPA’s failing metering infrastructure was well known, but noted that the Federal Emergency Management System had recently approved funds for replacing the entire metering system for electricity. “At this point we are going through an RFP process, so I’d like to keep some of the circumstances regarding that confidential,” Ms. Kelly said, refusing to disclose to commissioners the amount of funding FEMA has approved – \$138 million, as was reported in August by [the Consortium](#).

While awaiting the initiation of that project, Ms. Kelly said that WAPA has also sourced 1100 manual-read meters to replace failing units in the AMI system. “We are expecting delivery at the end of October,” she said. “We are currently in requisition process to order an additional 10,000 meters,” she disclosed. “We’re looking at a combination of refurbished meters as well as new meters.” The main challenge, Ms. Kelly outlined, was the “very long delay lead time in terms of obtaining them.” WAPA expects to receive the back of 10,000 meters in tranches of 2,500, beginning “in the next four weeks.” At the end of four months, WAPA expects to have all 11,100 meters on hand, but with 55,000 electric customers, the majority of the territory would still have to await the completion of the prudent replacement project to ensure that they have a functional meter.

Meanwhile, Ms. Kelly acknowledged that estimated bills have increased in cost, and further acknowledged that over 1400 customers have been relying on nothing but estimated bills for at least a year. “We are taking customers that have the greeted number of estimated billings, and we are addressing these,” she promised. The ranks of meter readers have also been increased, with additional budget being put in place for even more meter readers, as well as additional billing support in the customer service department, she made known.

Ms. Kelly also outlined some legislative challenges WAPA is experiencing around the billing issue. Prevailing law requires the utility company to do a reading no longer than 30 days from the last one.” In the months of July and August, there are 31 days,” the CFO noted. “The customer

may receive a read on the first or the second of the month, and then on the 30th or the 31st...they have another read.”

Ms. Kelly requested the support of the PSC in approaching the legislature to change the relevant statute, allowing WAPA to bill once per month, instead of maintaining the 30-day requirement. “We also have a challenge in that the current legislation requires that we do not back bill for more,” Ms. Kelly added, saying that “those two things combined give us a challenge from a customer perspective.” Receiving two bills in a month could lead to consumers mistakenly believing they are being overcharged, she argued.

The interim CFO also noted the large increase in demand for electricity in recent months, given elevated temperatures. “Some of our engines that would normally be on for eight to 10 hours a day are on 18 hours or more,” Ms. Kelly told commissioners. “What that ultimately means is that customers are putting their air conditioning on for longer hours of the days, and what that translates to is higher consumption on their bill.”

All these factors “conflate together from a customer perspective, to cause them to have concerns,” Ms. Kelly argued. To alleviate the issue, WAPA is “working overtime” to process adjustments for customers who are challenging their bills, said customer service manager Marlene Francis.

PSC Commissioners ordered that WAPA submit a “comprehensive report” from July to present information about customer complaints; how many had been received, and the status of each one. Ms. Kelly said that the utility had recently created a logging system for complaints, so that information could be collated relatively quickly.