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With Internet Usage Skyrocketing During Coronavirus Pandemic, FCC Grants ATT Additional Spectrum Access for USVI, Puerto Rico

Coronavirus / **Published On March 27, 2020 04:11 AM /**

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With leaders around the world ordering residents to stay home in an attempt to blunt the spread of the coronavirus, communications companies have seen a surge in internet usage, as people shelter in place. This has been true for the U.S. Virgin Islands, where thousands of residents have taken to online platforms to learn about the latest coronavirus news.

Noting the importance of communication during this crisis, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) on Thursday announced that it has provided AT&T — the USVI's and Puerto Rico's number one mobile service provider — with additional spectrum access to the USVI and PR to accommodate the traffic, so that users don't see their speeds drop to a crawl during these times.

The commission said it is granting AT&T access to the AWS-4 spectrum, currently licensed to DISH, for 60 days to expand its network capacity to meet expected increases in network traffic as a result of more Americans on the islands working from home, social distancing, and sheltering in place.

“Staying connected while staying apart is the reality right now across America during this pandemic, and that is no less true for those living in Puerto Rico and U.S Virgin Islands,” said FCC Chairman Ajit Pai. “We have put a special emphasis on helping those on the islands stay connected following the terrible storms that hit them in recent years. And we continue that work today in a new kind of emergency. I thank DISH for consenting to this use of its spectrum and to the U.S. Department of Justice for its cooperation. I’m grateful to AT&T for requesting this STA and I’m pleased we can grant it.”

The FCC said it has granted Special Temporary Authority to a number of carriers around the country since the start of the national emergency. This increased wireless capacity, the FCC said, is essential to keeping Americans connected and is an essential complement to the "Keep Americans Connected Pledge" launched by Mr. Pai, pursuant to which over 500 broadband and phone service providers have now publicly committed to take specific steps to keep their customers online during the crisis.

The FCC added that it has placed a special priority on ensuring that communications networks are available and resilient for the people of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Last year, the commission voted to allocate more than \$900 million in support for fixed and mobile broadband networks on the islands through the Uniendo a Puerto Rico Fund and the Connect USVI Fund.