

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Majority Senators Say WAPA Outage Revealed Shortfall In Emergency Preparedness

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ST. CROIX – The Majority Senators based in St. Croix issued a joint press release Monday saying that the 14-hour power outage this past weekend was a good dry run in case of a real emergency.

The blackout – caused when a heavy surge interrupted the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority's ability to distribute electricity to its feeders about 4:50 a.m. Saturday – revealed that the Juan F. Luis Hospital's two generators were not in working order and that some wireless and landline communications did not function with WAPA down.

“In my opinion, Saturday’s outage highlights the need for better contingency planning throughout government,” Sen. Novelle Francis Jr. said. “Contingency planning is the backbone of emergency preparedness and should be second nature in the territory as we must constantly maintain a state of readiness for hurricanes and other natural and manmade disasters. Clearly, there needs to be a greater examination of our overall planning and readiness, to include public communication, which would have helped to allay our residents’ concerns as the outage progressed.”

Referring to the emergency room patients who sat in the dark for several hours during the outage, the Majority Leader Sen. Samuel Sanes said lessons must be learned from what happened.

“Our most vulnerable were left in the dark for over 6 hours,” Sanes said. “This must not happen again, and going forward better planning and preparation for ‘worst case’ scenarios need to be in place. WAPA personnel, emergency personnel and Virgin Islands officials should find it necessary to create a plan of action. A territory wide plan which will prevent this type of “blackout” from occurring again must be implemented now, rather than later. The entire government should have learned from this unfortunate event the importance of more effective Crisis Management. We must not allow our island, our territory to fall into darkness like this again.”

The Senate President, Sen. Neville James emphasized the link between a poor economy and the power outage.

“The unfortunate day long WAPA outage over the weekend only strengthened my resolve to work towards getting our government back to the days of solvency and productivity,” James said. “If we can generate the revenues that we once did, then meeting our financial obligations where WAPA is concerned would decrease and, in a perfect world, eliminate equipment failures at our local power plants. The facilities cannot maintain themselves. We need resources, both human and financial, to meet the electricity needs for all of the residents, territory-wide.”

All the senators commended WAPA’s employees for resolving the issues that led to the outage as quickly as possible, including Sen. Kurt Vialet.

“I would like to commend WAPA for expeditiously dealing with a very difficult problem,” Vialet said. “I was so impressed by the nurses’ commitment to ensure that patient care wasn’t compromised during the power outage.

Vialet praised the people of St. Croix for being patient during the blackout and said lauded “the nursing staff” of the Juan Luis Hospital and their “valiant efforts” in attending to patients during difficult times.