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Dear Editor, I'm Sick and Tired of WAPA

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Ashley and Tionee Scotland, a married couple, protest on Saturday. Mr. Scotland is running for the Territorial Committee District of the USVI Democratic Party. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

Dear Editor,

I have always made a practice to not publicly comment on things that I may not have an alternate solution for, or on something that I may not be well versed on. However, with what is taking place with the V.I. Water and Power Authority (WAPA), I cannot continue to be silent on what appears to be gross mismanagement and a lack of accountability. I know that this issue, like so many others in our community, is one that was inherited by the current administration. It's an issue that did not start with them, but I am hoping that they can at least set the next generation on the right course to solve it. Like so many other Virgin Islanders, I have listened to and watched countless

hearings by the V.I. Legislature on WAPA. After each hearing, I never feel like we are any closer to resolving some of the same issues that have been occurring for years. I am not referring to the frequent power outages that continue to wreak havoc on our appliances, and in some cases where people rely on medical equipment to stay alive, actually put lives at risk. I'm not even referring to the obscene rates that the authority charges that literally choke the life blood out of our community and economy, bringing about financial ruin to small business and suffocating the wallets of our consumers. Although the aforementioned issues are handicapping our community's growth, I recognize that the solutions to those issues are multilayered and will require patience (a virtue that most no longer have) and time to properly correct for sustainability into the future.

What troubles me the most are the things that although simple to address, are not being confronted and resolved. Inaccurate billing has been a thorn in the side of almost every WAPA consumer for almost as long as I can remember. As a consumer that already has had to deal with frequent power outages and outrageous billing rates, the least the authority can do is get consumer billing accurate. This needs to be a mandate not just handed down from the current CEO, but one sent down from the Governor to his board, and people need to be held accountable for that to be accomplished. This has gone on long enough, we do not need a solution or fix tomorrow, we need it now. Accurate and timely billing will not only help with WAPA's cash flow issues, but it will also aid in restoring some trust and patience in the authority as they work to address the first two issues mentioned.

Secondly, WAPA needs to hold its Directors and Managers accountable for misconduct. If what is circulating is true, that a Director was able to award his own personal company a contract and he is still currently employed by the authority, this is a gross violation of the public's trust. Everyone is entitled to due process, but it should not take longer than 30 days to investigate if an employee used his position and authority to enrich himself personally using either local or federal funds through a direct contract or indirect subcontract. We must do better, the current and next generation is watching.

We are sick and tired, and sick and tired of being SICK AND TIRED. I've summarized a few of my action items below:

1) Fix the smart meters and the communication towers that were supposed to provide accurate information to the billing department. If the current contracted smart metering company cannot meet this mandate, open the process up again to other possible bidders. Prior to the hurricanes in 2017, some residents were still receiving estimated billing. Let's not continue to pour more money in a system that continues to fail us. Set a hard deadline and start to review alternatives:

- a. While the smart meters are being repaired, implement an internal control system or process that accounts for large bill variations. A resident should not see a 300% increase on their bill without an internal investigation being conducted to see if that resident actually legally consumed that increase. If a process is currently in place, it needs to be augmented or scrapped and redone because it does not currently work.
- b. Allow for residents to have real time access to their overall power consumption usage, once the smart meters are repaired or changed. This will allow the consumers to have greater control over their energy usage, and it will help to detect erroneous energy usage that may occur as result of fraud or equipment malfunction. Thus, aiding both the consumer and the billing department in rectifying the situation.

2) Put tougher language in exempt employees' contracts that will allow for more rapid discipline and/or terminations for gross misconduct, to include social media infractions and professional

malfeasance.

- a. Upper-level management who become aware of malfeasance and do not act should also be disciplined. What good are the checks and balances being put in place if the people responsible for doing so turn a blind eye?
- b. Auditors / Investigators in charge of investigating such charges, if substantiated should be required to make a redacted report public, as well as mandatory referral of the audit to the DOJ.

Submitted on Wednesday by Ashley Scotland, a candidate for the Territorial Committee District of the USVI Democratic Party.

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