

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Cellphone Dead Spots Soon A Thing Of The Past In VI? Mapp Takes Tough Stance On Service Providers

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ST. CROIX -- Governor Kenneth Mapp said his administration hosted the vice president of AT&T about two weeks ago, with the aim of compelling the wireless cellphone and internet services company to provide ubiquitous cellphone coverage in the territory. Following the meeting, Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs (D.L.C.A.) Commissioner, Devin Carrington, was charged with mapping all so-called "dead spots" in the territory, and has provided the governor with a draft of those areas, which was to be presented to AT&T.

Mr. Mapp said AT&T's technical team members are in the territory this week to investigate all the no-service areas, to get them "functional and working, and to ensure

that USVI customers receive the kind of service that U.S. mainland customers do. He said service providers like Sprint, Viya, "or anybody who has a license to provide cell service in the Virgin Islands" -- would see similar fates. "You're either going to do it on the level you're required to do it on the U.S. mainland, or we're going to simply push back against you for not fulfilling your responsibilities to deliver service to the customers for what they're paying for," he said.

Mr. Mapp says he wants to put cellphone service providers on notice that landline telephones are becoming more and more a thing of the past. "People are relying on their cellular devices, and we in the Virgin Islands are charged for service just like our counterparts on the U.S. mainland. But the quality of our service is just ridiculous... It's just not good," Mr. Mapp said. The governor spoke of certain parts on all three islands that cellphone service is nonexistent.

The pressure on cellphone carriers comes as the territory prepares for the [May 15 Vigilant Guard exercise](#), being hosted on all three islands. The event — full scale disaster simulation exercises coordinated by the U.S. Northern Command -- will test the territorial government's ability to respond to a catastrophic event, looking closely at how officials coordinate the delivery of federal and military assets in support of emergency response operations. A key element of the exercise's success is optimum cellphone service. The governor spoke of technology at the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (V.I.T.E.M.A) that allows the government to notify all residents in the Virgin Islands at once in the event of an emergency. But for the system to function properly, cellphone service must be available.

"These systems don't function well in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and we want it to be clear -- we accept that AT&T is a good investment in the U.S. Virgin Islands and a good corporate citizen, but it's gotta do its part, and it's gotta fulfill its responsibility to its customers," the governor said.

It was not clear whether AT&T would be able to make service available at all of its dead spots before May 15; the company may need to install new towers, or boosters, to fix the problem -- work that could take months to complete. But the governor's pressure on cellphone carriers may soon end a frustration that virtually all Virgin Islanders have experienced.

Speaking of the system that allows the government to contact all its residents to alert them in case of an emergency, Mr. Mapp described how well the coverage works on the U.S., noting that it wouldn't matter if you're paying for cell service in the territory or on the mainland, you would be notified regardless. Because of this, Mr. Mapp said, "It was important for us as a government to say to our partner AT&T and to Sprint, and to the others, it's now your responsibility to ensure that full and unfettered access of these devices, and the services that you're selling to the people of the Virgin Islands, that they can in fact receive those services, that if they need to call 911 in an emergency, that they don't need to travel another mile," Mr. Mapp said.

He added, "Personally, I've been out in the community, I can look at the cell tower and I can't get service, and that's just not good." The governor said he received the vice president's assurance that dead spots would be a thing of the past, following AT&T's assessment and subsequent action to solve the problem.

Government entities present at the meeting with AT&T included D.L.C.A., V.I.T.E.M.A., and the Bureau of Information Technology. Also present was Attorney General Claude Walker, according to the governor.

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