

The Virgin Islands Consortium

AT&T Cellphone Tower Generator Stolen, Knocking Out Cellphone Service On St. Croix

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ST. CROIX -- AT&T, which has been the champion cellphone service provider in the territory during hurricanes Irma and Maria, suddenly went down this morning, leaving residents unable to communicate. First, the internet service went out, followed by cellphone communication. Some residents had surmised that the company had temporarily taken down its towers to perform maintenance, and that AT&T would be back up to provide better service than the intermittent reception of the past few days. (Before and during Hurricane Maria, AT&T's service, both calls and internet, was almost spotless.)

But that summary was wrong; AT&T's generator at the company's Gallows Bay tower was stolen, which eventually caused a domino effect that saw most -- if not all -- of St. Croix losing internet service first, then the ability to make calls on the company's network.

At the tower now is David Goodrich, commander of the extrication unit at St. Croix Rescue, who has been guarding the site since private citizens took it upon themselves to not only provide a generator, but security as well. Robert Armstrong, a member of the well-known Armstrong family on the island and owner of multiple businesses, used his bobcat to transport a generator he provided to the site, and received help from Tom Schoenbohm, a communications tower expert, to install it. Mr. Schoenbohm dried certain parts of the tower that had collected water, and turned it back on. The thieves damaged the automatic transfer switch in the process of stealing the generator, so Mr. Schoenbohm hardwired the replacement into the tower.

Yet, even after turning it back on, the tower did not work because it had lost linkage with an AT&T tower in La Grande Princesse. Mr. Schoenbohm linked the tower to AT&T's tower in Miami, and then went to the Cheese Burgers in Paradise tower, performed some maintenance, and turned that tower on as well.

As of Saturday afternoon, the towers were being guarded by private citizens who were volunteering their time. Mr. Armstrong and Mr. Goodrich are calling on local authorities to provide security for the sites, noting the importance of communication.

"During a natural disaster, the key things are communications, security and fuel. You need communications to communicate with everybody, you need fuel to run those communications, and then you'll also need security to secure that fuel and communications. You need that before food and water, because if you don't have communication to distribute supplies, it's not going to work," Mr. Goodrich said.

Mr. Armstrong said if local authorities provide security at the AT&T towers to protect the generators, it would free him, along with his employees, Mr. Goodrich and Mr. Schoenbohm, to head to Blue Mountain -- the most important communications tower on St. Croix, with towers from the Coast Guard, St. Croix Rescue, V.I.P.D., the radio stations and other critically important first responders -- take one of the 25kw generators currently at his home and energize that entire site, which would restore communications to the entire island and many important organizations.

All they're asking for is some help with securing the towers so that the generators there are not stolen.

*Feature Image: David Goodrich guards an AT&T cellphone tower in Gallows Bay.
(Ernice Gilbert, VIC)*