

The Virgin Islands Consortium

WAPA Receives 'Willful-Serious' And 'Serious' Citations in Death Of Lineman By VI OSHA

WAPA / **Published On June 19, 2018 08:41 AM /**

Wyndi **June 19, 2018**



ST. THOMAS – Nine months after the untimely death of Jason Julius, his grieving loved ones await an explanation while the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority administration remains silent on what exactly happened to their lineman.

‘You have an emergency’

Faye Liburd had been waiting on her fiancé to come home on the evening of Sept. 12, 2017 when W.A.P.A. personnel came knocking to notify her that she had “an emergency.” She was then rushed to the Roy Lester Schneider Hospital where she met more W.A.P.A. personnel and a doctor who bore heartbreaking news.

“I kept asking ‘What happened to Jason?’ No one would tell me,” she said. “All they told me was that something happened. What happened?”

All she knew was that he was one of the electricians working to restore power to the island during the aftermath of Hurricane Irma. She imagined that maybe he’d been shocked or had fallen, but she never anticipated the news that would come next.

According to Ms. Liburd, it was an emergency room doctor who told her that the man she’d spent 17 years of her life with had died after being involved in “an accident.”

To date, the details of that accident are still unclear.

VIDOSH Investigation Finds WAPA at Fault

Documents from the V.I. Department of Labor’s Division of Occupational Safety and Health (V.I.D.O.S.H.) indicate that the division pursued an investigation the day after Mr. Julius’s death. The findings are damning.



According to W.A.P.A. being issued two citations for violations labeled as “serious,” respectively.

Jason Julius (right) poses for a photo with fellow lineman

According to the citations issued on March 8, Mr. Julius had been working on or near exposed energized lines on 10th Street Sugar Estate when he was fatally electrocuted, but his death could have been avoided if the right safety precautions had been put in place. (Read the citations [here](#)).

The V.I.D.O.S.H. investigation suggests that W.A.P.A. failed to provide the proper protective resources needed for “hot line work” (work done on energized lines); failed to properly train the employees who were on the team during the incident in which Mr. Julius died; and failed to make sure Mr. Julius was the appropriate distance away from the hot lines.

V.I.D.O.S.H. also claims that during the investigation of Mr. Julius’s death, W.A.P.A. failed to provide pertinent records and did not allow investigators to question some of the

employees who witnessed the incident in a timely manner.

According to senatorial candidate Dean Andrews who was the V.I.D.O.S.H. director at the time, two management officials who'd witnessed the event had to be subpoenaed for questioning, but they've never been interviewed to this day. Mr. Andrews said these key witnesses were shielded by W.A.P.A. officials.

"They would find 20,000 ways to say they weren't available or we don't have the authority," Mr. Andrews said during a phone interview.

As for training records and accident reports, those haven't turned up either.

"In some of the items, we asked W.A.P.A. for stuff and they outright refused to give it to us," Mr. Andrews said. "I don't know if it was incriminating for them, but they did not provide us any more information to say that our citation would be incorrect, so that citation stands."

When an employee is involved in a serious accident on the job, there should be two investigations – one from V.I.D.O.S.H. and an internal investigation – according to W.A.P.A. Employees Association (W.E.A.) President Ian Forde. It's the union's job to monitor the internal investigation, he said.



According to Mr. Forde, all employees who witnessed Mr. Julius's accident were interviewed internally. But, like Mr. Andrews, Mr. Forde said that records and documents relating to the incident have yet to be produced. Informal conferences including all three entities – the W.E.A., V.I.D.O.S.H., and W.A.P.A. – took place, but no documents were produced, Mr. Forde said.

"We're still waiting for a pending report from the Authority as to the findings of what happened," the union president said. "Up to this day, we haven't gotten that report as yet."

Does W.A.P.A. take responsibility for anything that happened that day or does the authority contest all of the findings from the V.I.D.O.S.H. report? According to Mr.

Andrews, W.A.P.A. has contested every item outlined in the issued citations.

“They contested all of them. Believe it or not,” Mr. Andrews said. “But that doesn’t mean anything. It just means they don’t want to be accountable. It doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

Since the incident, W.A.P.A. has gone through big, structural changes, including the transfer of then-Executive Director Julio Rhymer to the Office of Management and Budget in December of 2017. The details behind Mr. Rhymer’s short-lived tenure at W.A.P.A. are still vague.

Lawrence Kupfer, the former V.I. Next Generation Network CEO, took over as executive director at W.A.P.A. in January. By March, V.I.D.O.S.H. had issued the citations relating to Mr. Julius’s death.

The present W.A.P.A. administration is currently mute on the entire issue.

The Consortium reached out to W.A.P.A. spokesman Jean Greaux for comment; unnamed legal advisors, Mr. Greaux said that the authority citation was still ongoing.



Jason Julius

“As this case is still being actively investigated, the Authority is not in a position to address any of the questions you have raised,” Mr. Greaux said via email. “W.A.P.A. continues to cooperate fully with OSHA in the investigation of this most unfortunate accident.”

The raised questions he referred to include the type of safety precautions and training practices that are typically put into place for W.A.P.A. linemen; a description of what happened to Mr. Julius from W.A.P.A.’s perspective; the frequency of in-house inspections and supervisions; and the reason for withholding training records, accident reports and other documents from V.I.D.O.S.H.

A History of “Near-Misses”

The issue of safety at W.A.P.A. has become increasingly important to people like Mr. Andrews and Mr. Forde in light of what Mr. Andrews calls a history of “near misses.”

Both sources say this isn’t the first time an employee has suffered tremendously due to on-the-job hazards. According to Mr. Forde, a certain measure of danger is expected for “class three” employees like linemen, but the frequency at which incidents are happening at W.A.P.A. is alarming.

“That frequency is a little too much for an entity of this size and this magnitude,” he said.

Mr. Andrews referenced another incident where a W.A.P.A. employee had to lose both of his arms after an on-the-job accident. When asked about that incident, Mr. Forde had tears in his eyes.

“It’s hard because a lot of people don’t understand it because they’re not involved with the aftermath,” he said. “Some of the things that I see when I visit it really takes you back to a realization that this individual is not ever going to be the same again, no matter how much you try. The family is going to be affected forever.”

The Cost of a Life

Ms. Liburd still feels the residual pain of life without the man she would have married in December.

“I feel broken....I cry and I cry,” she said. “I don’t sleep. It’s like I’m still waiting on the night shift for him to come home.”

She still remembers when they first fell in love almost two decades ago. She remembers the flowers and notes he would leave on her windshield whenever he passed by her workplace and was unable to see her.

“He was my soulmate, honestly,” she said.

But although Mr. Julius had a special love on reserve for Ms. Liburd, he was known for having plenty of love for others. Ms. Liburd shared fond memories of his larger-than-life personality through pictures during an interview on Sunday.

“He was just a people person – very loving. There wasn’t anything that you would have wanted done and he not do it for you without even thinking,” she said. “He had such a genuine heart.”

For her, his death has cost her the remainder of a lifetime without someone that she felt an unmatched love for. For his daughter Te’Andra Richardson and his son Jecoy Julius, Mr. Julius’s death means life without a biological father.

For W.A.P.A., too many incidents like this could cost the authority money, Mr. Forde believes.

“When you look at the cost of just one employee being out on a job injury...if you look at an employee being out for three weeks to a month, it could cost the authority anything between \$10,000 to \$20,000,” he said.

And according to Mr. Forde, Mr. Julius was one of the best employees.

“He took a certain pride in getting the job done,” he said. “Julius had this knack about just wanting to do line work. It wasn’t about the money for him; it was about the actual work.”

His death, it would appear, has cost the authority a dedicated employee.

From Mr. Andrews’s view, that’s why V.I.D.O.S.H.’s role is so important. Their investigations aren’t meant to cast blame, he said, but to pinpoint how agencies like W.A.P.A. can prevent other incidents from occurring again. But when the authority refuses to share key documents, it hinders the process toward improvement.

These incidents could also be costing the authority its employee morale. On a scale of one to ten, Mr. Forde rates employee morale “in the negatives.” Both he and Mr. Andrews believe that the time has come for drastic changes regarding employee safety.

What Does Change Look Like?

The approach for change to create a culture of safety seems to be multifaceted, and the perspectives on how to do so are diverse.

Mr. Andrews believes that laws should be changed. According to Mr. Andrews, there is greater protection for employees in the private sector than for government workers in similar situations.

“What’s wrong with it is: if it happens to a government worker, there are no fines, but if it happens in the private sector, there are fines, and someone may go to jail – in the same territory,” he said. “I think it’s something in the law that we have to fix. They’re antiquated.”

If the law were to outline greater penalties in instances where government workers are hurt due to negligence, Mr. Andrews believes it would act as a deterrent against those types of accidents.

Mr. Forde believes a safety culture can be developed if there are more stakeholders at play. For this reason, W.E.A. has submitted a proposal to the W.A.P.A. administration asking to become an integral part of the training process for W.A.P.A. personnel. This proposal is part of a larger proposal outlining other terms and benefits for employees.

That proposal was submitted in June of last year, but Hurricane Maria and management changes have been setbacks in getting it approved, Mr. Forde said. A year later, the W.E.A. is still in the process of negotiating the terms of the proposal.

Ms. Liburd believes that change can start with an apology and a more humanistic approach. Although W.A.P.A.’s insurance covered Mr. Julius’s funeral costs, she still wants to find closure and to see safety measures taken to protect other linemen.

“You can never be too big to humble yourself,” she said. “You should be bold enough to say an incident happened, and we’re gonna correct this.... They should value someone’s life a little more.”

Correction: June 19, 2018

A previous version of this story incorrectly stated that Jason Julius had been working to restore power during the aftermath of Hurricane Maria when he died. However, he had actually been working during the aftermath of Hurricane Irma.

© Viconsortium 2026