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Citizens' Calls for Government Action Over WAPA Rates and Service Growing Louder Via #WAPAMUSTGO and the Alliance for Consumer Justice

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The public outcry over soaring utility bills and sketchy service from the Water and Power Authority is escalating day by day.

As of Sunday, 3,286 people have signed their names to an online petition calling on Virgin Islands political leaders to take “immediate action,” to include declaring an energy and water crisis in the territory and federal intervention to set WAPA back on course.

The “[WAPA Must Go](#)” campaign was created last month on Change.Org. The original goal of the campaign was to obtain 2,000 electronic signatures, a number that was quickly surpassed. The new objective is 5,000 signatures.

Change.Org allows its users to create petitions, mobilize supporters and influence policy-makers through its open, online platform. According to the site, more than 200 million people worldwide are “creating change” by signing petitions for causes they support.

The #WAPA Must Go petition poses a list of demands to Gov. Albert Bryan Jr., the Virgin Islands Senate, Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett and the federal government, at large.

“The U.S. Virgin Islands is in a water and power crisis,” the petition reads. “The People of the U.S. Virgin Islands demand accountability and immediate action. For over 25 years, the citizens of the U.S Virgin Islands have been impacted by price gouging practices of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority ... The water supply is dangerous and cannot be consumed, causing consumers to purchase water in plastic bottles daily, further complicating our ecosystem and water supplies with constant plastic bottle waste.”

Current and former Virgin Islanders are using social media to sign their names to the petition.

Iffat Walker of Conyers, GA, explained her reasons: “I believe we have an obligation to make things better for the future generations. I believe that this bold stance is a part of the vision for a better VI. I want and need my 73yr old father to be in a home where his lights work when he turns them on and where he has clean water.”

High and inconsistent electric bills drove many to sign, as well. “My bill doubled last month and I cut back consumption. I only have one fan and one light and pay almost \$200,” wrote Tahvia Pursley of St. Thomas.

“Something has to change,” the petition reads. It goes on to call for:

- Gov. Bryan, Congresswoman Plaskett and the V.I. Senate jointly declare an energy and water crisis in the territory.
- The federal government appoint an external agency to oversee the operations of WAPA until the utility is restructured or replaced.
- All WAPA board members be removed from their posts.
- All senior level staff in WAPA be terminated effective immediately.

“During a hearing that took place on 10/1/2019, the CFO of WAPA testified that she has a company credit card with a limit of \$100,000 with some personal allowed expenses on it. She must be removed immediately,” the petition says.

Petitioners also demanded a series of fiscal oversight measures, including a full financial audit, with the findings presented to the public, detailed public information about a \$2 million payment made to an offshore account “with no reasonable explanation,” and prosecution of any employee or board member “found to have personally benefited” from inappropriate use of public funds.

The Alliance for Consumer Justice

The first Virgin Islanders’ campaign for accountability at WAPA started earlier this year with the Alliance for Consumer Justice, a group co-founded by former senator Clarence Payne.

The Alliance uses more traditional advocacy tools – anti-WAPA protests at the Legislature and the Public Services Commission and door-to-door petition drives.

It started as a protest of a few dozen at a summer Public Services Commission hearing over a proposed WAPA rate hike. The movement has since mushroomed to include Virgin Islanders who are simply fed up with the constant increases while WAPA's service has not improved. Thousands have signed the Alliance's petitions to the PSC and to lawmakers.

“The residents of this territory time and time again have done everything WAPA has asked us to do and everything WAPA has asked us to pay for. And at the end of each decision and each promise made by them the people never get the results that was promised to us. The impact of an increase at this point will have a very harmful effect not only on our economy, but the elderly, the working poor and single families out there in the community. The people of the territory are saying we've had enough and we are sick and tired of having to micromanage our public utility service,” Mr. Payne said previously.

WAPA had not responded to a request for comment by the deadline for posting this report.

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