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Virtual Events, Meetings Disrupted by Major Viya Outage Friday After Fiber Line Was Cut by ATT Contractors

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Cut fiber cable. Viya experienced its biggest outage since the pandemic on Friday, Oct. 9 after its fiber cables were cut by AT&T contractors mistakenly. By. iStock/VICONSORTIUM

ST. THOMAS — Viya, the largest telecommunications company in the U.S. Virgin Islands experienced a major service interruption Friday that impacted a number of its consumer products and services in the St. Thomas-St. John district. The outage — caused by a Viya fiber cable being cut by AT&T contractors — lasted for over twelve hours for some customers and affected cable subscriptions, residential and corporate internet service, and wireless phone service on both islands, according to Viya. Viya’s popular MiFi devices also experienced gaps in connectivity

since they run on the same towers as cellular phones.

"We are experiencing intermittent connectivity issues," Viya said at 10:41 a.m. The telecommunications company noted that network issues were affecting "wireless and internet services," on St. Thomas and St. John.

A number of retail stores on St. Thomas, including Office Depot placed signs at their entrances informing customers that they could only accept cash, presumably due to limited connectivity while attempting to process electronic payments via internet connection. "This was a major fiber cut affecting the East End areas of St. Thomas and parts of St. John. If you reside or operate your business in these areas, it is likely that your current lack of connectivity is related to this issue," Viya said in an initial statement.

It's difficult to pinpoint an exact number of customers — or subscriptions — impacted since Viya rarely releases specific numbers tied to service interruptions of this nature. In this instance, the fault was not Viya's, it was AT&T's. One school teacher who lived in to St. John mentioned that the outage affected her all the way in Philadelphia, adding that she "had a guest speaker from St. John" scheduled for her students on Friday morning, "but that didn't work out."

While the outage didn't affect all Viya subscribers, particularly customers on St. Croix, the service interruption likely had far-reaching effects on daily productivity as more people work from home to limit the spread of Covid-19 in the territory. Businesses also were likely to suffer from lost revenue, delays, and canceled meetings as engineers worked to bring the company's network back online.

Students learning from home, government officials conducting important meetings, and ATMs were all impacted in part by what may very well be the first major internet interruption since the global pandemic hit the U.S. Virgin Islands. On St. Thomas, particularly on the east end, ATM lines were noticeably longer and residents also experienced frustrating lapses in connectivity from cell carriers like Sprint, AT&T, and Google Fi. Although these carriers are independent in their own right, its likely that Friday's interruption was not just isolated to Viya's network.

On social media and through releases, Viya provided updates as customers overwhelmed customer support lines. "We apologize for the delay in communication. Unfortunately, this outage was caused by AT&T contractors cutting through a major fiber line," a Viya representative said. "The damage impacted our own internal network causing a delay in communications. Our team is working diligently to reroute network traffic to minimize impact to our customers while repairs are made."

The outage was the largest district-wide interruption Viya has experienced this year and it marks the second time in under nine months that AT&T has cut fiber that is owned by another local telecommunications entity in the territory. The ["Call Before You Dig"](#) bill was signed into law by the Legislature in September 2015, requiring companies and contractors to dial a publicly available number before performing underground work.

In February, AT&T unintentionally cut through a major fiber line on St. Thomas that functioned as the foundation of the Virgin Islands Next Generation Network's gateway that connects St. John to the outside world. viNGN said the severed fiber left St. John without internet access for up to four hours and would cost an estimated \$100,000 to fix and several months to complete.

Earlier this year, AT&T Legal Counsel Tom Bolt argued that the Virgin Islands did not have a geographical map to locate active underground networks. And last October, AT&T announced

that it had [agreed to sell](#) its Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands businesses to Liberty Latin America Ltd. for \$1.95 billion in cash, allowing the telecommunications giant to shave its debt load and move closer to repurchasing shares. AT&T's operation in Puerto Rico provides cellular, landline and internet connections. It had 1.1 million wireless subscribers in both markets, and as part of the deal about 1,300 AT&T employees will be transferred to Liberty Latin America.

AT&T is now focusing future investments on building out its FirstNet infrastructure for first responders in the 50 states as well U.S. territories, and has begun expanding its 5G network on the U.S. mainland.

Just after 11 p.m., Viya issued a final notice to customers about the hours-long service interruption. "We are glad to announce that our services are back up," the statement read. "Again, we apologize for the service interruption today and we truly appreciate your understanding and patience."

The company offers fixed wireless internet, cable internet, fiber internet, and mobile data in the U.S. Virgin Islands.