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Viya, Pointing to Low Adoption Rate of Federal Subsidy For Broadband Internet, Partners With Human Services to Create Voucher Program

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The Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications was told on Monday that Virgin Islanders are not subscribing to the Affordable Connectivity Program which provides for eligible customers to receive a \$30 per month federal subsidy for broadband service.

Viya CEO Geraldine Pitt told the committee that the adoption rate of the ACP was not being utilized by the thousands of customers who qualify, and that the telecommunications firm has been working with the Department of Human Services to create a voucher program to promote the ACP.

“Subscription to the programs remain low and that is why Viya is working with the Department of Human Services to create a voucher program that DHS can administer to promote the ACP among the more than 2,600 recipients of SNAP, Medicare, and other programs,” Ms. Pitt told the committee.

She was among telecommunications provider representatives who in their testimony provided an update on the status and future of provider operations and services, the status of broadband implementation, and the future of telecommunications in the territory.

Ms. Pitt explained that Congress created the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) under which customers are eligible for a \$30 per month federal subsidy towards broadband service if they are current recipients of certain federal aid like SNAP, Medicaid, WIC, or Lifeline services.

“The community will receive more information about the voucher program in the near future and we are grateful to DHS for their cooperation,” said Ms. Pitt, who explained that Viya has launched the Affordable Connectivity Program with three offers, including a free mobile plan with unlimited local talk, text, and data plus a free Samsung phone; free MiFi (mobile hotspots) Internet that includes 30 gigabytes per month; and the \$30 credit on any home Internet plan.

Liberty USVI, the local arm of communications giant Liberty Latin America, provided an update on its efforts to implement 5G services in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and said government red tape was slowing activation in certain areas. Such setbacks include the difficulty to lease the necessary locations to erect cell sites needed to address coverage and capacity issues. “For example, Coral Bay, Fortuna and East End. We are ready to invest in the territory but we need your support in deploying the network and getting a speedier way to get these leases, and agreements approved and signed,” said President and CEO of Liberty Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands, Naji Khoury.

He said the Liberty Mobile Network has undergone significant upgrades over the last few months. “Our latest tests demonstrate that Liberty provides download speeds of 35Mbps on average and the speed test trends are showing improvements of 108% of median download speeds measured by Ookla, compared to our baseline of the pre-fiber project.”

Mr. Khoury added, “As for Liberty’s fiber deployment project for the mobile service, we have completed 100% of the trenching work, pulled 100% of the fiber and completed the migration of a small temporary portion of aerial installation to underground conduits. That represents an 88% of total Liberty Mobile cable distance throughout the entire U.S. Virgin Islands.”

Liberty [recently acquired Broadband V.I.](#) for an undisclosed sum.

Speaking about her company’s social responsibilities, Ms. Pitt, the Viya CEO, said that in some instances, Viya is the first carrier that is actively engaged with the Department of Human Services, The V.I. Housing Authority, AARP VI, Lutheran Social Services, and other community stakeholders to ensure that eligible participants are aware of the available subsidized programs.

“These efforts are consistent with our decades-long commitment to the community, and we intend to continue that commitment long into the future,” she said.

Sharing information about broadband services in the territory, Ms. Pitt said that currently, most customers are experiencing a tripling of their bandwidth speed because of a phasing experiment. “And so we are considering what that means for us in the longer term and if we will be able to make it stay in place for residences.” For now, however, “it will be for businesses,” she said.

