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WAPA Continues to Erode Purchasing Power of Virgin Islanders as Estimated Billing Continues Two Years After Promise of 'Accuracy and Timeliness'

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A collage of complaints from Virgin Islanders who say they have been receiving inconsistent power bills from WAPA. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The Water and Power Authority (WAPA) has, for years, been struggling to provide its customers with accurate bills for the electricity they consume.

In May 2020, WAPA embarked on a project to restore its Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI), which had been badly damaged by the 2017 hurricanes. After the restoration, which was due for completion at the end of that year, the Authority would be in a position to "ensure accurate and timely billing," according to the [press release](#) WAPA put out on the matter.

The Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) is an automated system where meters send information about usage to collectors across the territory. Those collectors then relay the data to collection centers, which then transfer the data to WAPA's network where it is used for billing and monitoring purposes.

Or at least, that is what is supposed to happen.

In November 2021, WAPA's Chief Information Officer Julius Aubain said that the high number of estimated bills that were still being sent out at the time was because over 12,000 electricity meters [could not connect](#) to the Authority's metering system — more than one in every five of the approximately 54,000 meters WAPA has deployed across the USVI.

"We have been seeing some device failures on the communications side.... Most are not communicating to the system," Mr. Aubain told the Public Service Commission during a meeting of the PSC in November 2021.

The meters were working, Aubain explained, just not able to transmit their data remotely. Manual readings, WAPA's CIO said at the time, could be taken, but data entered in such a manner is often rejected by the system. Consumers receiving estimated bills were supposed to be issued letters explaining why this was the case.

WAPA's independent consultants, PA Consulting, have been dealing with the thorny issue [for quite some time](#), but the problems with estimated billing continue — and seem to be getting worse. In July 2022, WAPA CEO Andrew Smith [testified before the Senate Committee on Finance](#) that the AMI was only reading 70 percent of meters, down from the 80 percent his CIO had cited not even a year before. The blame for not conducting manual readings was this time placed on the authority's lack of finances to hire sufficient numbers of meter readers.

Recently, complaints from consumers have been pouring in, with people saying they have been receiving estimated bills that are way out of line with their typical usage. Some have even taken to copying the Consortium on emails to WAPA customer service, frustrated they say over the Authority's sluggish responses and general lack of alacrity in fixing the issues.

On Tuesday, the Consortium asked its readers to chime in with recent experiences with unexplained fluctuations in their power bills. Out of [over 50 responses](#), consistent themes emerged - people seeing high bills even as they reportedly consumed less, billing disputes taking inordinate amounts of time to resolve, and confusion over inconsistent billing cycles.

The frustration of consumers over inexplicable billing is just the symptom of the underlying issue: the seemingly eroding performance of the AMI, a system fundamental to WAPA's revenue-generating ability.

The inaccurate billing issue erodes the purchasing power of Virgin Islanders already under pressure from the highest electric rate in all of America, high inflation, coupled with rising interest rates which makes all debt more expensive.

One customer who responded to the Consortium's post seeking responses from ratepayers, said she had to pay WAPA \$1,800 before the authority rectified the billing error. "A couple months ago my bill went up over 2,000 dollars. It was a huge process and WAPA did finally come out and credited me over 1800 dollars for the mistake. Recently my bill went up over 200 dollars using much less power as I did a couple months before when it was hotter and I had my fans and occasionally turned the AC on. I was gone most of December and half of January. My bill comes around the 20th of the month and I haven't gotten a bill yet. Wondering when I will get the bill and

what it will be since I wasn't here to even use electricity," said Janelle Schindler.

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