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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

January 8, 2018

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMODITY EXCHANGES,
ENERGY, AND CREDIT
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GENERAL FARM COMMODITIES
AND RISK MANAGEMENT
SUBCOMMITTEE ON LIVESTOCK AND FOREIGN AGRICULTURE
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH CARE, BENEFITS,
AND ADMINISTRATIVE RULES
STEERING AND POLICY COMMITTEE
REGIONAL WHIP

Received & Inspected
JAN 22 2018
FCC Mailroom

The Honorable Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th St., S.W.
Washington, DC 20536

Dear Chairman:

On behalf of my constituents, I commend the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for its quick response to aid the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) and its residents following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. I write to urge the FCC to do more as the recovery from these two unprecedented hurricanes faces a long road ahead. A major part of the rebuilding process is our telecommunications sector.

Viya, the largest telecommunications provider in the USVI, is working to restore its network facilities and services to provide residents with vital communications services. There is a priority on restoring wireless networks, because they can be brought online more quickly and meet the pressing need for essential communications services. However, these efforts continue to be hampered by the lack of electricity, failing generators caused by over sustained use and insufficient fuel, lack of access to remote areas to repair and restore networks, and theft of fuel and generators. Under normal circumstances, the Virgin Islands presents a challenging economic and geographic environment in which to operate a telecommunications business. Those challenges are substantially greater presently and for the foreseeable future.

The wireline network was virtually destroyed. Viya must rebuild the landline communications infrastructure almost from scratch. The storms devastated the local economy leaving many residents out of work and businesses unable to reopen. The financial distress that USVI citizens are facing should not deprive them of access to critical communications services. Therefore, I respectfully ask that Viya's requests that the FCC provide financial support to defray customer's telecommunications costs and support the rebuilding of the wireless and wireline networks should be granted as expeditiously as possible. Doing so will provide certainty to Viya about the support available as it implements and accelerates its restoral efforts.

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Viya and other carriers will require federal assistance in the rebuilding process if telecommunications structures are to withstand future hurricanes. Underground hardened networks may be more expensive to build, particularly in insular areas such as the USVI, but resiliency now will prevent continual costly reconstructions in the future.

I am concerned that without a onetime infusion of support for wireless and wireline networks, resilient rebuilding will not be possible. In the current environment, the Territory's telecommunications carriers are unable to bill customers as services remain intermittent. Furthermore, many businesses have not resumed operations, including several in the critical tourism industry, which employs approximately one-third of the USVI. Large hotels have indicated they will take months if not years to resume normal operations and have dismissed their employees in the interim. Without jobs or income, residents are unable to pay their bills, impinging cash flow into the market that would have gone to rebuilding networks.

The American citizens of the USVI need the FCC's continued support. Rebuilding wireless and wired networks to restore essential facilities, including construction of storm-hardened networks where feasible, will be less expensive in the long-run, if USVI facilities are rebuilt in a more resilient manner. For this reason, I ask for your prompt approval of Viya's petitions for customer cost relief and wireless and wireline rebuilding support.

If you have questions regarding this request, I can be reached at (202) 225-1790. Alternatively, a member of your staff can reach Angeline M. Jabbar in my office at (202) 226-7978 or at Angeline.Jabbar@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,


Stacey E. Plaskett
Member of Congress

Cc: Commissioner Mignon Clyburn
Commissioner Michael O'Rielly
Commissioner Brendan Carr
Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel