

Internet Providers Detail Plans to Keep V.I. Connected During Pandemic

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viNGN Chief Information Officer Daryl Wade, left, with lead field technician Celestino White Jr. in 2019. (File photo)

As just about everyone shifts to working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, internet providers have seen a massive surge in traffic and say they are working to bridge the digital divide the virus has made so glaringly apparent.

Demand for internet has increased 35 percent over the same period last

year, "driven by the response to COVID," said Daryl Wade, chief information officer for the Virgin Islands Next Generation Network, or viNGN.

Wade spoke Wednesday at a webinar on internet connectivity, hosted by the Economic Development Authority and moderated by Cusa Holloway, the agency's Business Incubator Program manager. He was joined by Kevin Hughes, chief marketing officer for Broadband VI, and Morris Reid, chief technology officer for Viya.

"The shift is in where bandwidth is being consumed," said Wade, noting it is now the home versus the office. "It has magnified the digital divide in many ways."

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Roughly half of U.S. adults surveyed said the internet has been essential to them during the coronavirus pandemic, said Wade, citing national statistics from the Pew Research Center. Another 34 percent deemed connectivity to be "important."

Wade's fellow panelists agreed.

"Peak usage is now 24/7. It doesn't just happen at 5 p.m.," when people get home from work, said Hughes. While Saturday and Sunday used to be the busy days, now it's Monday to Friday, and the networks notice slight dips only around lunchtime and on the weekends.

"All day is peak hours," said Reid. "It brought on a new level of bandwidth demand like you couldn't imagine." Usage increased dramatically between March and May and continues to climb each month, he said.

Adding to the load are more people at home streaming movies and videos, gaming and using exercise equipment such as Peloton bikes and fitness trackers that require connectivity, said Hughes.

Which is fine if you have internet and a computer, but many in the Virgin Islands do not.

In a bid to help, all three companies say they are working to close the gap by identifying areas of need throughout the territory.

For its part, viNGN has lifted data caps, given wireless companies more access to the spectrum – or wireless bandwidth – and is providing guidance to local government agencies, said Wade. YouTube and other content providers also have modified the delivery of their content, such as slightly reducing video quality to reduce bandwidth consumption rates, "to help overall traffic flow and still give people what they need to work," he said.

Longer-term plans, in conjunction with Viya, include more Wi-Fi in public spaces, especially outside of schools, thousands of Mi-Fi devices (the brand name for wireless routers that act as mobile Wi-Fi hotspots) at discounted prices for students, government agencies, businesses and

residents and technical support for the Education Department, in particular, as it grapples with the challenges of remote teaching, said Wade.

"I truly envision in the next couple of months you will start to see coverage expand," to give students access five minutes from home, if not at home, he said.

Viya has enlarged the physical areas that its hotspots cover, such as the whole of Tutu Park, said Reid. "It gives people the ability to spread out" and maintain physical distancing. Currently, there are 12 on St. Thomas, four on St. Croix and one on St. John, he said. Longer-term, the company is accelerating network bandwidth upgrades, expediting the installation of additional wireless cell sites and increasing wireless coverage by adding capacity to existing sites, said Reid.

Broadband VI is partnering with the Education Department to provide internet connectivity to all public schools, but also to the homes of students through its "Broadband VI Student Internet Offering," said Hughes. Realizing that many teachers also do not have home internet, it has offered discounted service to educators territorywide in partnership with the American Federation of Teachers, he said. Hughes noted that these programs have been done on the company's dime, with no local or federal subsidies.

"Students are very important to us. It may sound cliché, but students are the next generation," said Hughes. "It is important for them to have the connectivity they need."

He noted that Broadband VI was well-positioned to step up to the COVID-19 challenge, having learned from the twin Category 5 hurricanes, Irma and Maria, in 2017, when it was the first Internet Service Provider (ISP) to be operational after the storms. The company has worked to ensure resiliency

and redundancy with solar, battery and generator backup so its services continue when the power fails, he said.

The companies said they've also been working with customers facing financial hardships due to COVID-19 work disruptions, and per Federal Communications Commission guidelines, "we did not interrupt anyone's service at all," said Hughes.

This is all while ensuring their own workers remain safe while providing vital services, said Reid and Hughes.

While that's not an issue for viNGN, as a wholesale provider of broadband products and services to ISPs in the Virgin Islands, Viya and Broadband VI provide direct customer service. Viya has halted in-home visits during the pandemic, said Reid, offering self-install instructions, with technicians just outside the door. Broadband VI will call customers prior to a visit to ensure they have no travel history or signs of sickness and outfits its staff with personal protection equipment, said Hughes.

"Technology has held up. It has taken some added pressure," said Wade. "Let's work on closing the digital divide," and keep the lessons learned as we move forward. "There are a lot of business opportunities for those who adapt to the new normal."