

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH DISCUSSES PLAN FOR SEA VIEW TO MOVE FORWARD

Date : October 7, 2016



ST.THOMAS—The Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services, chaired by Sen. Kurt A. Violet, met Thursday at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall, to receive testimony on the current standing of the Sea View Nursing Home and Rehabilitation Center.

“We’re here to hopefully be able to come up with some solutions,” said the Committee Chair. “The intent of me having this hearing is not to just allow everybody to vent and to say what took place. I am hoping that by the time we end this meeting, that we will be able to develop a plan moving forward,” he said. The meeting provided the space for a status update on the elderly residents that were relocated from the facility as well as the residents of the Adolescent Unit and sparked the discussion on solutions to prevent what transpired from reoccurring in the future.

Dr. Anita Roberts, Acting Commissioner of the V.I. Department of Human Services testified.

“It was and is my position that the seriousness of this letter of demand called for immediate action,” said Roberts. “That plan of action was approved and sanctioned by the staff of HUD that participated in the telephone call,” she said. “Admittedly there has been a perception that this move was characterized by abruptness,” Roberts added. “I am sorry for any distress that any family member experienced as a result of this.”

During the discussion lawmakers asked Roberts where the directive came from to remove patients from Sea View. Roberts repeatedly said that the decision was a collaborative effort. “I did not make that decision on my own,” she said.

Claude Earl Walker, Attorney General for the V.I. Department of Justice, said that the Commissioner acted within her authority, “based on the fact that CMS has cut off funding as of July 30 and has said that the facility is in disrepair and has failed to meet CMS standards but it wants to be a skilled nursing home facility for rehabilitative care,” he said.

Senators wholly disagreed.

“This was not good judgement,” said Sen. Almando “Rocky” Liburd.

Sen. Novelle E. Francis likened the removal of seniors to the handling of criminals who were issued a warrant for their arrest in the middle of the night, forcibly removed and remanded. “What crime did these seniors commit,” he asked.

Sen. Kenneth L. Gittens shared his sentiment. “What you did was wrong,” he said. “This was an eviction.”

Sen. Justin Harrigan Sr., the Committee Vice Chair expanded on officials’ claims that their actions were taken to “protect” residents and in turn asked them explain what residents needed protection from. Sen. Harrigan asked if residents family members had raised concerns relative to patient safety with the Department of Human Services prior to their removal. Officials said that no concerns had been raised by family members.

Sen. Myron D. Jackson, referred to what occurred as a “travesty”.

“It is evident that the Department of Human Services could have done better,” said Sen. Jackson.

“The bottom line is we have an institution and it’s the only institution of its kind,” he said. Sea View is worthy of being sustained.”

Attorney Walker maintained that while he understood the position of lawmakers, Sea View’s receipt of federal funding holds the institution to a higher set of standards.

Dr. Alfred O. Heath, CEO of the Sea View Nursing Home and Rehabilitation Center said that he resented the implication that the standard of care offered to patients was subpar. “We still provide A1 care,” he said.

Sen. Violet asked Dr. Heath if he would be willing to sell the facility. Dr. Heath responded by saying he would sell Sea View in “half a minute” for a reasonable price.

Dr. Heath explained that he had received a “nebulous offer” from Governor Kenneth Mapp but would be willing to renegotiate.

Sen. Violet offered a resolution.

“In the interim, the plan should really be to maintain the patients at SeaView, maintain the present staff that is there at SeaView. The Government of the Virgin Islands [will] try to get into a purchase agreement to purchase the facility from Dr. Heath, transfer those employees over to Human Services. We shut Queen Louise down and relocate all of those patients up there and then we seek to get back CNS certification. That is the path I see,” he said.

“We do need to find the monies to purchase Sea View if we’re going to be floating any type of money for anything, Sea View need[s] to be a priority because we need to make sure that the elderly population on St. Thomas, [has] a home where they can go,” Sen. Violet added.

By the end of the discussion, lawmakers and officials expressed approval for the turn the discussion had taken.

“I can sleep tonight,” said Dr. Heath.

Committee Chair Sen. Kurt A. Violet, Vice Chair, Sen. Justin Harrigan Sr. and members Senators Marvin A. Blyden, Jean A. Forde, Novelle E. Francis Jr., Almando “Rocky” Liburd and Nereida Rivera O’Reilly, were present. Non-committee members, Senators Kenneth L. Gittens, Clifford F. Graham, Myron D. Jackson, Positive T.A. Nelson, Tregenza A. Roach and Janette Millin Young, were also present.