

COMMITTEE UPDATED ON HEALTH INDUSTRY POST-HURRICANES

Date : December 8, 2017

St. Thomas – The Committee on Health Hospitals and Human Services, chaired by Sen Rivera O’Reilly, met with officials from the Health Industry at the Capitol Building on Friday, to receive testimony on an update, post-Hurricane Irma and Maria.

“Before the storms, our average daily inpatient census was 60-80 patients. Following the hurricanes, our inpatient census has dropped by 50%. Patients with critical and long-term care were relocated to medical facilities on the mainland,” said Bernard Wheatley, Chief Executive Officer of Schneider Regional Medical Center (SRMC). This is a result of severe structural damages to the roofing system of the Roy L. Schneider Hospital and the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Center. The Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center is inoperable because of mold infestation.

Wanda Ruben Chief Executive Officer of the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital (JFL) shared similar sentiments. “The hospital’s patient census post-Hurricane Maria ranges between 30-40 patients compared to the average of 55-70 patients before the storm. JFL has suffered extensive damage on the roof, supporting structures and environmental challenges.”

“Where is JFL housing patients now?” asked Sen. Dwayne DeGraff. CEO Ruben, “Patients were relocated to the Virgin Islands Cardiac Center which reduced the inpatient capacity by 50%. the Western Shelters is used as a temporary medical facility as well.”

Lawmakers inquired about setting up a modular hospital that can treat patients in the Territory.

“When can we expect to have, a temporary medical center established through tents, modular units and structural repairs to both hospitals?” asked Sen. O’Reilly. Reuben Malloy, Deputy Commissioner of VIDOH, stated that the existing plans for the tents were problematic because the initial designs did not include all components of the hospitals. A timeline cannot be established for the modules and rebuilding both hospitals until federal agencies complete a full assessment.

Sen. Kurt Vialet said, “What is the status of the tents?” Daryl Smalls, Vice President of Facilities Management at SRMC said, “Phase I which is the construction of the eight tents are completed. Phase II also have eight tents. However, Phase III is still under production and is not completed. The Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Agency are still conducting assessments and a final decision will be made.

In addition to SRMC and JFL, the V.I. Department of Health (VIDOH) experienced structural

damages to the facilities and employees had to relocate to provide health services. However, VIDOH continued to remain active after the storms.

“VIDOH collaborated with local agencies such as VITEMA, St. Croix Medical and Schneider Regional Medical Center to evacuate a total of 441 medical evacuees, facilitated medical supplies and distribution, performed medical services assessment and requested the activation of the Emergency Prescription Assistance Program (EPAP),” said Malloy. EPAP is available from November 1, 2017, to February 3, 2018, and has served 558 people with a total cost of \$119,911.18 since activation.

In a line of questioning Sen. O'Reilly inquired about the number evacuees who died, the location of the medical facilities that had expired patients and the number of patient site visits by the commissioner to hospitals in the mainland. In response, Malloy said, “To date there were twelve patients who have perished. There is a nationwide tracking system that documents a patient's death and the hospital which it occurred. VIDOH does not have access to that. The commissioner is scheduled to visit evacuees at the hospital in Atlanta.”

“Has the process been fluid in returning the remains of expired patients who are off-island to be brought back to the Territory?” asked Sen. Novelle Francis. Malloy said, “The process of returning patients takes a lot longer than expected. The return of the remains is a prolonged process.”

Sen. Novelle Francis asked, “How has the V.I. Department of Human Services (VIDHS) assisted the people who are mentally ill and homeless post-hurricane?” Felecia Blyden, Commissioner of VIDHS said, “We are working with the Catholic Charities in both districts and non-profit agencies to offer temporary housing. VIDHS is also collaborating with federal agencies to provide permanent housing.”

Before the hurricanes, there were nine shelters available to residents in the Territory. However, on St. Croix the Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged, the Strive Center Knud Hansen on St. Thomas and the Bethany Moravian Church on St. John remains open. Additionally, VIDHS operated the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) Territory-wide. In which \$25,606,616 of D-SNAP benefits provided to eligible households; according to Commissioner Blyden.

Committee Members present are senators: Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Kurt A. Vialet, Novelle E. Francis, Jr., Janette Millin Young and Dwayne M. DeGraff. Non-committee senators attended: Jean Forde and Janelle Sarauw.

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