

LAWMAKERS UPDATED ON THE STATUS OF THE HEMODIALYSIS UNIT

Date : October 18, 2019

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THOMAS- Members of the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services, chaired by Sen. Oakland Benta, convened in a meeting at the Capitol Building on Friday, to receive testimony on the status of the Hemodialysis Unit at the Schneider Regional Medical Center (SRMC) and the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center (JFLH). Lawmakers also voted on several bills. All items approved will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

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Schneider Regional Medical Center Chief Executive Officer Bernard Wheatley, M.D. indicated that post-Hurricanes Irma and Maria there was minimal damage to the Hemodialysis Unit in 2017. However, services offered at the unit was restored in 2018. Presently, the outpatient unit at SRMC comprises of fifteen dialysis stations, one isolation room, and adequate staff to include an on-call nurse who assists approximately 90 patients receiving acute and chronic treatments; according to Wheatley. Despite continued patient care, Wheatley mentioned that the hurricane disaster recovery process is delayed due to the lack of funding. "SRMC is still awaiting the final disposition of a settlement agreement between the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Witt O'Brien, and the Government Agencies. However, once the level of funding is finalized, plans for the reconstruction of SRMC, the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute, and the Myrah Keating Community Health Center will commence," said Wheatley.

Unlike

SRMC, the Hemodialysis Unit at the Juan F. Luis Hospital sustained severe damages after the storms. As a result, patients were evacuated to the United States for continued care according to Tasnim Khan, M.D., Director of the Hemodialysis Unit at JFLH. In response to a line of questioning by Sen. Kenneth Gittens, Kahn stated that twelve patients died after the storms and dialysis treatments resumed in 2018.

Currently, JFLH is providing treatments to 90 hemodialysis patients in one out of two temporary dialysis trailers contracted and provided by the Federal Government. The second trailer is expected to be operable in a few weeks; pending safety inspections and required equipment. Johan Coto, Hemodialysis Patient at JFLH shared challenges that patients endure. "The biggest hurdle facing dialysis patients is the constant opposition from the current administration at JFLH. As patients, we try to be a part of the process in terms of treatment facilities yet there is a lack of response to the information requested by patients to the administration. There is no attempt to be transparent," expressed Coto, who suffers from renal failure for 21 years and is a patient at JFLH for the past 15 years. "This discussion leaves me with a heavy heart because everyone is an episode away from illness," said Senate President Novelle Francis. "We as leaders have to provide our people with hope to bring relief and services to them. Stakeholders must collaborate to address the concerns discussed in this hearing."

Furthermore, senators expressed the importance of strong leadership in the Virgin Islands Healthcare Industry. Sen. Benta said, "Solid leadership is required to ensure patient care is a smooth and transparent process. The administration at Juan F. Luis Hospital must collaborate with stakeholders to improve patient care." Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory stated that "There is a facade that life is good, and it is not because Virgin Islanders are not receiving adequate healthcare."

Separately, the senators voted and approved: Bill No. 33-0095 – An Act amending title 34 of the Virgin Islands Code by adding a new chapter 18 enacting the "Virgin Islands Medicaid Program Integrity Act."

However, lawmakers voted to hold in committee at the call of the Chair: Bill No. 33-0024 – An Act to require the Department of Human Services and the Department of Health to solicit proposals for the selection of a management company to partner with the Government of the Virgin Islands to provide administrative oversight services for assisted living and mental health facilities in the Virgin Islands.

Lastly,
the following was removed off the agenda: Bill No. 33-0118 – An Act amending Title 19, part IV, chapter 53, subchapter II, of the Virgin Islands Code by adding a new section 1441 requiring that all restaurants list major food allergens on their menu or menu board. **###**