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USVI Spends \$7 Million Annually on 44 Sociopathy Patients; Calls for Repatriation Intensify

Each patient costs up to \$350,000 yearly; local treatment could slash expenses

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The V.I. government could be saving millions of dollars by repatriating citizens who are currently housed in facilities on the U.S. mainland, said Dr. Laurie McCormick, speaking during a Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services hearing on Wednesday.?

Dr. McCormick, a psychiatrist invited to testify on the state of behavioral healthcare in the territory, complained that of the funds budgeted for mental health care within the USVI, “virtually all of that money goes for paying for 44 severely mentally ill with sociopathy, who are being detained in locked units stateside.” These individuals were found not guilty of criminal offenses by reason of insanity, but remain committed for public safety.?

While Dr. McCormick acknowledged that bringing these citizens home is easier said than done, she suggested that it could be achieved by hiring two district community health psychiatrists, with one to serve St. Croix and the other the St. Thomas-St. John community. This would then allow for Virgin Islanders committed in the USA to be cared for at the Eldra Schulerbrandt Mental Health Facility. “There is room in Eldra Schulerbrandt for at least some of these 44 patients,” she suggested. The mental health facility currently has a maximum capacity of 32 beds, with 25 individuals currently admitted. Two more are expected in the coming days.?

Dr. McCormick suggested that if the district psychiatrists are hired—with a combined annual salary of \$500,000—some patients at Schulerbrandt could be “brought back out into the community and cared for.” This would then make allowances for even more Virgin Islanders in overseas facilities to return home. As Dr. McCormick argued, the half-a-million-dollar bill to adequately pay the proposed psychiatrists pales in comparison to the \$7 million currently spent on overseas care. “Each time you bring one of those back, that's another \$300,000 to 350,000 each per year,” she estimated.?

However, nurse Alex Baron who heads the Eldra Schulerbrandt Mental Health Facility, is not convinced that hiring additional psychiatrists is the right move. She explained to lawmakers that the facility has no issues accessing psychiatric services from a local professional. “She comes once a month and I think that is sufficient for us because our clients are chronic,” Ms. Baron stated. The chronic nature of their conditions suggest that patients will not be released into the community any time soon, and thus will continue to occupy space at the facility.?

Nonetheless, lawmakers were supportive of calls to bring Virgin Islanders home. In December 2023, senators Ray Fonseca and Diane Capehart toured facilities housing mentally ill Virgin Islanders on the mainland to assess their welfare. “When they heard that we were from the Virgin Islands, they were like, ‘I want to come home’,” Ms. Capehart remembered. She recalled their longing for local food, music and scenery. “This is why we need to work collectively on legislation for long-term residential care.”?

“We could be saving some money,” said Senator Carla Joseph, who had also queried the possibility of re-housing overseas citizens at Schulerbrandt. She was buoyed by the response from the Department of Health’s Nicole Craigwell-Sym, who assured that “our intention is to return as many patients home as possible.” Patients, she said, are assessed on a “case-by-case basis to see how they fit into the facility.”?

It remains to be seen whether lawmakers will take any action to make the suggested changes to the mental health management landscape.