

Uncompensated Care Surge and Staffing Shortages Drive FHC's Budget Request for \$3.2 Million

FHC seeks an additional \$500,000 beyond the government's offer to address rising uncompensated care due to Medicaid program changes and fill essential medical positions, including dental hygienists and a full-time psychiatrist

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Frederiksted Health Care Inc. wants the Legislature to approve a budget of \$3.2 million for FY2025, \$500,000 more than the Government of the Virgin Islands' offer of \$2.7 million. According to FCH's Chief Executive Officer Massaræ Sprauve Webster, additional funds will help cushion the blow of forecasted increases in uncompensated care caused by the unwinding of pandemic-era [Medicaid program expansions](#).

FCH is the latest health institution to bemoan the anticipated rise in uncompensated care, and as a result has requested extra funding from the GVI. For Senator Dwayne DeGraff, the request is justified. “Let’s give them what they want,” he appealed to his colleagues. “I don’t have a problem with that.”

Lawmakers also took the opportunity to laud the medical institution for its quality of service. FCH was praised for its “multi-pronged approach” to recruiting new staff, including partnering with organizations on the mainland to identify temporary human resource support, as well as advertising through “organizations focused on community health centers.” FCH currently needs to fill several “extremely critical” positions including a physician, 2 dental hygienists, 2 dentists, and a physician's assistant.

Particular attention is being paid to identifying dental workers to provide what Ms. Webster considered an essential service. Currently, there is only one dental hygienist on staff, working 4 hours per week. This meant that FCH was able to provide preventative dental care to only 49 individuals in 2023. Until such time that FCH hires dedicated staff, it is exploring temporary options, including participating in a recent pilot program hosted by Health Partners of Western Ohio where 5 hygienists were stationed at FCH. According to Ms. Sprauve, “316 people received care through this project. These patients would have otherwise had to wait many months for care.”

Management has also identified a need for more psychiatric services as depression screening shows that many Virgin Islanders need support. “We just don’t have enough manpower to provide the service,” admitted Ms. Webster. FCH is currently exploring grant funding that would provide the resources to hire a full-time psychiatrist. One psychiatrist visits FCH once per month. “We know we have enough patients to fill a schedule to have a psychiatrist on staff, 40 hours a week, four weeks a month,” the FCH CEO said.

Meanwhile, the 155 individuals employed by FCH are facing unique challenges too. In October 2023, FCH fell victim to a “cyber ransomware attack that locked down all of our information technology systems and files, thereby impacting all our sites.” The attack forced staff to rely on “tedious” pen-and-paper documentation until January 2024. Since the breach, FCH has worked with local and federal authorities and a private cybersecurity firm, but “were unable to recover our files.” According to Ms. Sprauve Webster, the health center has not fully recovered from the attack. “Much information must be manually collected and re-entered into our electronic health records,” she explained. FCH does not believe that patient personal information was compromised, but rather made inaccessible.

Several lawmakers expressed concern with that update, but Ms. Webster says FCH is “confident with the measurements that we have put in place” to stave off any future ransomware attacks. FCH preventative measures include multi-factor authentication, penetration testing, and training staff to identify and avoid possible danger.

With its major goals and challenges outlined before the Legislature, Ms. Sprauve made a final appeal for approval of the budget request. For Senator Novelle Francis, their petition is “a good return on our investment... I’ll be an advocate to see to it that you receive the additional \$500,000 that you have requested.”