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Financial Support Crucial For Cancer Institute in St. Thomas as Opening Draws Closer

As the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute prepares to reopen in December 2025, officials emphasize the need for government funding to cover essential services, including patient care, oncology staff, and expensive treatments

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Rendering of the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute.

As long as there are no unforeseen circumstances that could create delays, the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute (CKCI) in St. Thomas will reopen in December 2025, according to Tina Commissiong, Schneider Regional Medical Center CEO.

Once that happens, however, there will be a need for some level of financial support to ensure accessibility for all Virgin Islanders, she told lawmakers on the Senate committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services on Wednesday.

She added that once CKCI is reopened, the center will be able to provide “comprehensive cancer care to our community” once more. Damaged by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, the absence of the facility has forced many Virgin Islanders to seek oncology services overseas. Local statistics reveal that each year, approximately 400 Virgin Islanders are diagnosed with some form of cancer, with roughly 125 annually deaths in the territory attributed to the condition, according to data provided by Ms. Commissiong.

“When CKCI reopens, it will be better than ever,” Ms. Commissiong declared, citing their intention to offer “first-class cancer treatment right here at home.” In an overwhelmingly positive testimony, the hospital CEO promised “[expanding] our screening programs,” critical to early prognosis and treatment.

The team responsible for the reconstruction of CKCI is working assiduously to secure critical pieces of equipment that will make the service offerings excellent. “Everything is on target to be here, on schedule,” said Darryl Smalls, executive director of the Territorial Hospital Redevelopment Team. He was responding to Senator Marvin Blyden, who was concerned with completion timelines.

When CKCI reopens in just over a year, cancer patients can expect “new services, including expanded infusion therapy services for rheumatology and additional services for neurology patients.” Additionally, Ms. Commissiong shared that the facility will provide “critical radiation oncology services,” which have been unavailable locally since the 2017 hurricanes. Pediatric oncology and maintenance chemotherapy for leukemia will also be available.

“We want to ensure that this new cancer center is state of the art,” agreed committee chair Senator Ray Fonseca. He was interested in reducing the need for Virgin Islanders to travel overseas for care – usually to the mainland – and also noted that it would take a “diverse team of specialized health care professionals and support staff,” to run the facility and care for cancer patients from the Virgin Islands and abroad.

Indeed, Ms. Commissiong has forewarned the Legislature that “we will be asking for financial support from the government and from this body to support the operations of CKCI when it reopens.” Oncologists, social workers, and radiologists are some key positions to be filled as health officials work toward “[building] CKCI back as the premier cancer center in the region.” CKCI will also require support to fund “upkeep and maintenance of the radiological equipment.”

SRMC will also explore new avenues to secure necessary medication at a more reasonable cost, but until such time, financial support for that aspect of operations may also become necessary. Ms. Commissiong notified the committee that “funding needs to be set aside specifically for patients who live within our territory, who will not have any ability to cover their own cost of treatment.” She referred to the informal request as “an essential consideration that must be tackled in advance of the reopening of CKCI.” Some combinations of cancer medications can be as high as \$10,000 to \$15,000 per dose, a burden on patients who have no insurance.

“I believe that we’ll work collectively to address some of the shortfalls that we may be experiencing there,” stated Senator Novelle Francis. Between construction costs and securing equipment, rebuilding CKCI has cost approximately \$35 million to date. Mr. Fonseca warned against expending all the funding already appropriated, and leaving no room to hire new staff.

As a way to potentially add to its revenue base, Ms. Commissiong said that the reopening of the Institute is an ideal opportunity to market the territory as a medical tourism destination. Dialogue has already begun with officials from the British Virgin Islands about developing a partnership, and Ms. Commissiong expects to expand the conversations regionally. “We know that many of our neighboring islands don't have their own linear accelerator,” noted the SRMC CEO. The device is useful in destroying cancer cells. “It’s a lot easier for their patients to come here than to go to the U.S. mainland..and other places. We think it's going to be a very attractive option,” she told lawmakers.

“I think that medical tourism is definitely something in our future,” agreed Sen. Francis.

Even as SRMC is working diligently to reopen the facility by the date promised during Wednesday’s meeting, consideration is simultaneously being given to expanding oncology services to St. Croix when the opportunity presents itself. CKCI, as Ms. Commissiong says, is intended to be a “first-rate facility” offering “first-rate care to the people of the Virgin Islands.”