

Healthcare Workers Sound Alarm Over Conditions at Juan F. Luis Hospital

An open letter from hospital staff describes mold exposure, supply shortages, unpaid benefit deductions, and staffing pressures at JFL, prompting a response from Plaskett acknowledging federal notification and long-standing healthcare challenges.

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Healthcare professionals on St. Croix are publicly raising alarm over what they describe as worsening conditions inside the territory's hospitals, detailing shortages, unsafe working environments, and administrative failures that they say now threaten patient care and staff well-being. Their concerns, laid out in an open letter to the community, have prompted a formal response from Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, who said the situation reflects a broader, long-standing crisis in territorial healthcare.

In the open letter, staff members at the Juan F. Luis Hospital described working conditions they say have become “unbearable,” citing mold, dust, and unsanitary conditions inside aging facilities. According to the letter, some employees have fallen ill as a result of the environment, yet instead of receiving support, staff say they have faced pressure from supervisors who themselves are under strain from leadership.

One staff member recounted being asked to pay their own hospital bill despite becoming sick in the workplace, explaining that many employees live paycheck to paycheck and fear losing their jobs. The letter describes anxiety among salaried employees who are now required to clock in and out with only a 10-minute grace period, leading to long morning lines and fear of lost pay for even minor delays. The scene, the letter states, is “hauntingly familiar,” evoking memories of long lines after Hurricane Maria.

The letter further alleges that deductions for employee benefits such as Aflac, Global MedEvac, MASA, and other medical plans are being taken from paychecks but not sent to providers, resulting in lapsed coverage for some workers and their families. Staff say hospital leadership has not been transparent about where those funds are going.

At the same time, the letter claims executive leadership has received raises since March, which employees were told were for “additional duties.” Staff contrast this with what they describe as executives arriving in company vehicles and working in air-conditioned offices while frontline workers face extreme heat, lack of drinking water, no paper towels, and limited basic supplies.

According to the letter, hospital staff are rationing essential items including medication, diapers, catheters, and bandages. “We are rationing care,” the letter states, adding that human life is being rationed while leadership “profit[s] and smile[s] for photos.”

The letter describes a workforce that is exhausted, anxious, and afraid, stating that morale is collapsing and staff are leaving. It alleges that employees who speak up are removed and replaced by individuals described as friends of the CEO who lack qualifications and do not understand the realities of working short-staffed in high-risk conditions.

“We are not lazy. We are not troublemakers,” the letter states. “We are healthcare workers begging to be treated as human beings.” The letter concludes with a call to the community to help bring attention to what is happening at the hospital, stating: “We deserve dignity. We deserve safety. We deserve to be heard.”

In response to the open letter, Plaskett issued a statement acknowledging the severity of the situation and confirming that the Medical Executive Committee of the Medical Staff fulfilled its regulatory obligation by notifying the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) of adverse conditions involving supplies, staffing, medications, equipment, pharmaceuticals, and patient placement challenges.

“Healthcare in our country and exponentially in the Virgin Islands is in crisis,” Plaskett said. “I commend the Medical Executive Committee and the medical staff for their extraordinary commitment to our community.”

Plaskett described the CMS notification as a serious step that reflects systemic failures that have reached a point where medical professionals are obligated to formally document conditions that compromise their ability to deliver appropriate care. She emphasized that these conditions did not develop overnight.

The congresswoman detailed her April meetings with healthcare stakeholders from both districts, noting escalating concerns related to staffing shortages, supply deficits, and operational challenges. She outlined decades-long efforts by herself and predecessors to address structural inequities, including repeated legislative efforts to update Medicare reimbursement formulas for Virgin Islands hospitals, which are still based on outdated base years under the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982.

Plaskett also highlighted Medicaid funding changes secured during the Biden administration, which increased the federal share from 55 percent to 83 percent and raised the annual funding ceiling, calling it a permanent and historic shift that strengthened healthcare delivery in the territory.

She further discussed advocacy for Disproportionate Share Hospital payments, Critical Access Hospital designation, and expanded reimbursement mechanisms for rural and geographically isolated hospitals. Beyond hospital funding, Plaskett stressed the importance of economic security for vulnerable residents, including her long-standing push to extend Supplemental Security Income benefits to Virgin Islanders.

Plaskett noted her efforts following Hurricanes Irma and Maria to secure federal funding for hospital rebuilds, stating that FEMA has obligated more than \$928 million for the Roy L. Schneider Regional Hospital and \$834 million for the Juan F. Luis Hospital. She also cited additional support secured during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Addressing the current moment, Plaskett said a CMS notification could lead to federal inquiries, accreditation reviews, or corrective action, describing such scrutiny as serious but potentially necessary to force long-avoided changes.

“Virgin Islanders cannot afford another decade of avoidable decline,” she said.

“Our hospitals should not operate under reimbursement formulas based on data from forty years ago,” Plaskett added. “Our medical staff and dedicated hospital employees should not endure resource challenges, poor working conditions, and stagnant wages, while carrying an ever-increasing burden.”

She concluded by reaffirming her commitment to continue fighting for healthcare equity, stating that Virgin Islanders deserve the same access, dignity, and quality of care as every American citizen.