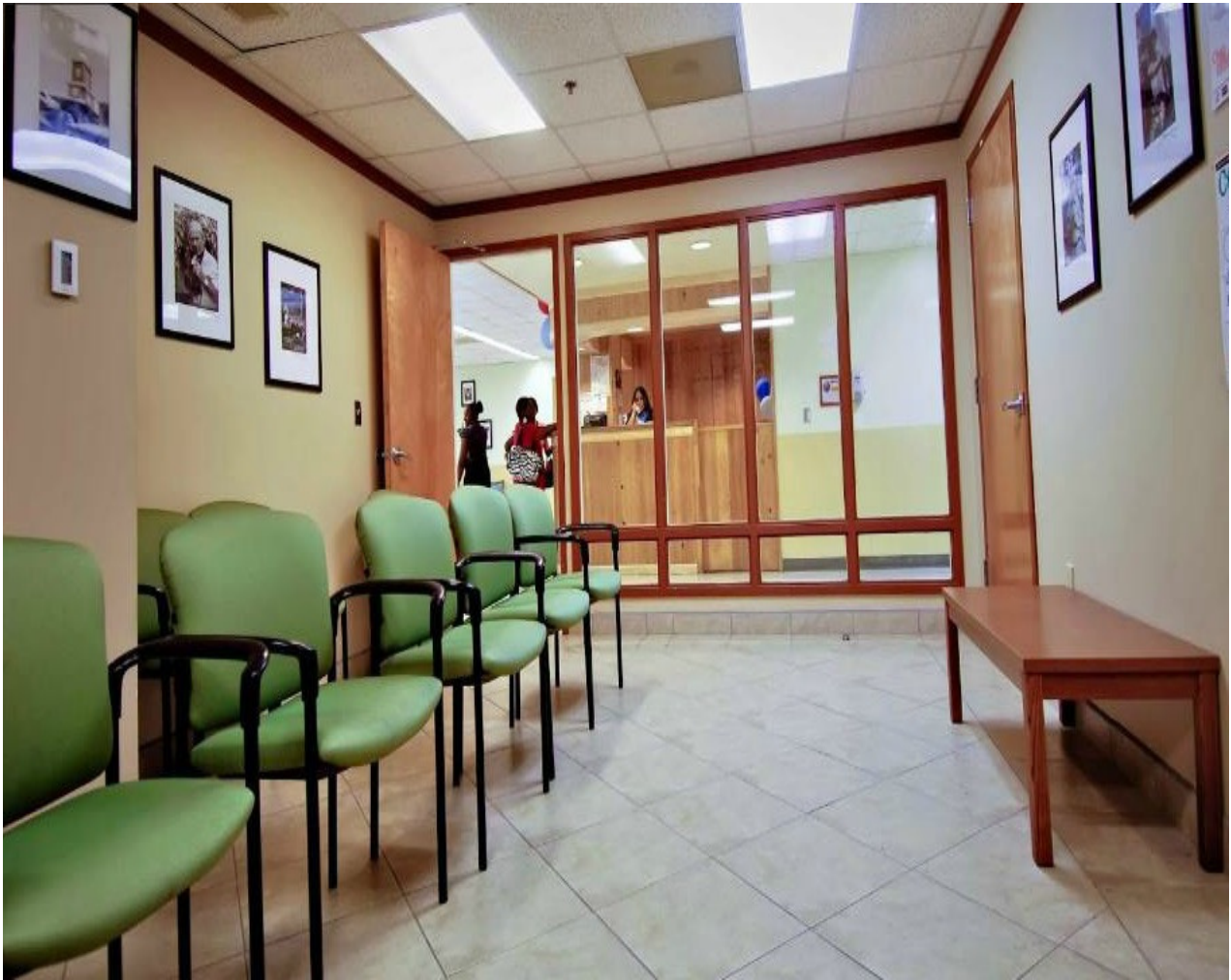


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Nurse Advocate Says Nurses "Upset" At CMS Departure

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Last Thursday's news of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) decision to cease funding to St. Croix's Juan F. Luis Hospital (JFL) on Oct. 9 sent shock waves across the Territory. CMS's pull out means the hospital will lose its accredited status, and both medicare and medicaid will no longer provide reimbursements to the hospital for care--marking yet another crushing financial blow to the already struggling hospital.

But, how will CMS's decision affect JFL staff nurses?



Annie Henry, chief negotiator for the Virgin Islands

State Nurses Association Collective Bargaining Unit.

The *VI Consortium* caught up with retired nurse Annie Henry, chief negotiator for the Virgin Islands State Nurses Association Collective Bargaining Unit, following a press conference on Friday when JFL Interim Chief Executive Officer Dr. Kendall Griffith publicly announced the grim news.

Henry represents the staff nurses at JFL and Schneider Regional Medical Center in St. Thomas as well as at the V.I. Department of Health, and said CMS's departure was "devastating."

"It's a devastating effect to the community, let me say first, in that that means CMS will not be paying for their health services unless it's an emergency," she explained. "The emergency room will have some funding, but when fifty-nine percent of your income for revenue from insurance is coming from CMS, that is a financial blow to a hospital that's already in a financial scrap for funding sources."

During the press conference, Dr. Griffith said that while CMS's departure will cut off JFL's primary funding source for insurance reimbursements, a decision he vows to appeal, he is already in talks with Governor de Jongh, the Legislature and Congresswoman Donna Christensen to identify emergency funding sources for the hospital.

But Henry questioned the CEO's logic.

"Where is that funding going to come from," she asked, "from the central government, who themselves, are having difficulty with finance? But I think that the legislature and the governor should come up with whatever financial needs for this community. We only have one hospital and one hospital must provide the services for the people in this community."

As for the impact CMS's departure will have on JFL staff nurses, Henry said she hopes there would be none.

"I'm hoping that there will not be a drop in the bed count, because we only have about an eighty-bed provision for the community for a population of over fifty-thousand people, which I do not think is enough beds," she said.

Henry further explained that JFL has seen bed cuts "from about a one-hundred-and-twenty-five bed capacity to less than a hundred to service over fifty-thousand people."

While Henry lamented the idea of lowered bed counts, which would translate to cuts in the number of staff nurses, she acknowledged it was not something Dr. Griffith discussed. However, she noted some disheartening news she has already received.

"[Bed cuts have] not been brought up, but I'm already told that some nurses are leaving," she revealed. "They are resigning, so I'm hoping that the union can step in and convince those nurses to stay because we do need nurses."

Henry went on to praise the efforts of the Luis Hospital nurses.

"Nurses are the heart of any hospital because we're twenty-four-seven workers," she said. "And we need our nurses to stay."

Henry also pointed out JFL already has a shortage of nurses, estimating there to be a little over 100 nurses currently employed at the hospital. However, she explained many of them are not the direct patient care providers her union represents.

"You have [nurses] that are in administration and those that are middle managers," she said, "I represent just the staff nurses."

And, Henry said her nurses are "upset" by CMS's decision.

"They are upset and they are wondering will this impact, as I said, decrease the bed count, would that decrease the nursing services that you need," she explained. "But you heard today that the CEO said that he does not plan to lay off anyone."

However, Henry was skeptical of Dr. Griffith's outlook, stating, "But I wonder, how can you say that when you're already in the red financially and you're going to lose fifty-nine percent of your funding."

Despite her misgivings, Henry remains hopeful of a favorable appeal and eventual turnaround for JFL.

"I am hoping and praying that the appeal is accepted from CMS and of course, retroactivity to October ninth for funding," she said.

With that Henry said the V.I. State Nurses Association Collective Bargaining Unit will remain supportive of JFL in its efforts to regain its accredited status.

"Whatever the hospital needs from the union and being successful in their appeal, we'll be there for the CEO," she offered.