

The Virgin Islands Consortium

JFL CEO Defends \$720,000 In Raises As Hospital Struggles To Make Ends Meet

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Juan F. Luis Hospital (JFL) CEO Kendall Griffith Monday defended his decision to give raises to hospital employees amounting to \$720,000, contending that even while the hospital is aware that necessary austerity measures must be taken, the pay increases were balanced against "experience, morale and increased job duties."

Griffith's remarks came Monday as the hospital is under fire again after an investigative report by the *Virgin Islands Daily News* unearthed that JFL had given out the raises in 2014 while it was [on the brink](#) of losing its Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) certification. According to the newspaper report, the pay increases came at a time when the hospital was, and still is, grappling to stay afloat -- owing more than \$50 million

to its lenders and struggling to make payroll.

To justify his decision, Griffith, in a prepared statement, pointed out the necessity of hiring "skilled and talented" professionals, and at the same time keeping the small pool of efficient employees already at the hospital.

"The increases were balanced against the experience, morale and increased job duties of our employees and the financial situation of the institution," Griffith said. "While we realize the need for austerity measures, we must balance this against the loss of highly skilled and dedicated employees. In order to function efficiently and effectively, we not only need to recruit talented professionals, but we also need to maintain the cadre of responsible and efficient talent already on staff. Many of these persons were owed money because they worked in a higher capacity for long periods of time without being compensated."

Griffith also said that JFL employees generally make less than their counterparts in hospitals on the mainland, where a lower cost of living is also enjoyed.

"It's not enough to compensate our newest employees at current market rates," Griffith continued. "We must also acknowledge the sweat equity and work that has been put in by our local employees, as well. We acknowledged their sacrifices over many years. Many of those employees improved their skill sets and advanced their vocational education. We placed them into the positions where their skill sets could be maximized, both for the efficient running of JFL and the improvement of patient care. There were no favors done for anyone."

JFL announced the addition of three new employees to its staff at a press event held [earlier this month](#). Emmett Hansen II is the hospital's new chief of strategic management and communications and receives an annual salary of \$95,000; Dr. Ken Okolo, PhD, is JFL's new chief operating officer and receives an annual salary of \$200,000; and Tim Lessing, the hospital's new chief financial officer, makes \$185,000 annually. The newly filled positions alone add \$480,000 to the hospital's payroll. However, at the press conference, Griffith pointed out that at least two of the positions were essential to moving the hospital toward compliance with requirements set forth by CMS.

Yet, it was the hiring of Michael Younger, JFL's assistant chief financial officer, who served as the hospital's acting CFO before Lessing was hired, that has caused some to question the hospital's vetting process in the wake of the Nedra Dodds hiring last September that left JFL officials scrambling for answers as to why she was brought on as a consultant, after an investigative report by *VI Consortium* [revealed](#) that Dodds' medical license was suspended in the state of Georgia in connection with two patient deaths at her now-defunct private practice.

According to the newspaper report, Younger's troubled history includes many run-ins with the law.

In 2014, he pleaded guilty to a felony assault charge in Colorado stemming from a 2011 domestic violence incident. Court records show that Younger is currently on probation for that charge, which is a Class 6 felony, the least serious class felony in Colorado, according to the *Daily News* report.

Griffith, in his statement today, did not address the reports about Younger, however he encouraged the public to listen to testimony JFL officials will give before the Senate's Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services, chaired by Sen. Kurt Violet, on Tuesday, Feb. 24, at 1 p.m.

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