The Virgin Islands Consortium

At J.F.L. Board Meeting, Talk Of Financial Trouble And Potential Layoffs

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ST. CROIX -- Employees of the Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center filled the hospital's third floor classroom on Thursday evening, a small space where meetings and other activities are held, to first listen and later voice their concerns to the hospital's board on ongoing issues at J.F.L. The board had gathered to discuss operations and, in an executive session that same night, attempted to determine J.F.L. CEO Dr. Ken Okolo's future after it was revealed that his doctorate degree was gained from an unaccredited university. Dr. Okolo makes well over $300,000 annually.

Governor Kenneth Mapp has been sending his representative, Juel Molloy, a member of his financial team, to the meetings to relay to the board the governor's positions, and to help give guidance on major decisions. Ms. Molloy was especially forthcoming on Thursday, making known -- although not revealing what was the cause -- that there was no money to maintain status quo at the hospitals. As the meeting went on, grievances about high salaries for some, overworked employees and others who had taken leave -- some well over a year while receiving a salary and benefits from the hospital -- were brought to the fore, and Ms. Molloy said those behaviors could no longer be sustained.

Those things were done in the past because we would take Peter's money and pay for Paul, Ms. Molloy said, using the popular phrase to draw comparison. But Peter has no more left, and so things must change, she added. Ms. Molloy was referring to the government's yearly financing of the hospitals, which she hinted would see major cuts this year. "Bar a miracle from God, we have some serious trouble ahead. We all have to pray," Ms. Molloy said, the room quiet as she made the daunting remarks.

Being the governor's representative on the financial team, Ms. Molloy has access to a lot of the government's inner workings. She said residents who often leave the territory for care were indirectly hurting the hospitals. "Too many of our healthcare dollars are circulating outside of the Virgin Islands," she said. "So it doesn't matter if Medicare gives the world of money and we put whatever, [if] you're going to take that money and send it outside of your economy to circulate in somebody else's economy, you'll always be broke. So that's something we'll have to look at in terms of how we do government insurance." Ms. Molloy gave the example of giving premium insurance packages to residents who receive care locally. "There are some really tough decisions that's going to have to be made, [because] from an economic standpoint it's very, very clear that we have not been maximizing the use of our dollars. We've been making some big-time errors."

J.F.L. employee John Dempsey, concerned about Ms. Molloy remarks, concluded that layoffs were coming, and suggested that redundancies be exacted equally at J.F.L. and Roy Lester Schneider Hospital. But Ms. Molloy said while layoffs were possible, it was a decision that would be made only after all other ideas and options were exhausted. And Board Chairman Troy deChabert Schuster said redundancies could be prevented if employees continued doing better at serving patients.

"We're going to be doing an in-depth review," Ms. Molloy said. "We're going to be looking at all facets of the hospital. The one thing that we all know is that we cannot continue the way that we have. I don't think there is any disagreements on that."

Ms. Molloy said the government's financial team, during a separation of health and hospitals initiative, was able to separate figures from regular employees and those in the hospital's top administration, and found that those in the latter bracket saw salaries sometimes ten times higher that the rank and file.

"I think anybody who wants to be honest would know that you cannot continue. You were able to do this because of borrowing from Peter. But Peter now says, 'my pocketbook is dry; so you better try something else.' So this is why I'm saying we're all going to have to be very creative. We cannot be selfish, we have to try to save the system because it's all we have. One over here and one on St. Thomas.

"We have to be realistic, the last thing in the world we want to do is talk about sending a lot of people home; because unlike the states where you can send people to the welfare system, the welfare system here is also capped. So we don't have a lot of the luxuries that a lot of states have," Ms. Molloy concluded.

J.F.L.'s board called an emergency meeting that's to take place on Monday at 5:00 p.m.