

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Resignations Of Three Emergency Room Doctors Cause Alarm At J.F.L.

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ST. CROIX -- Well placed sources made known to The Consortium on Tuesday that as of noon yesterday, the only two remaining emergency room doctors at the Juan F. Luis Hospital had resigned, a scenario that threatened to halt the operation of one of the most critical arms of any hospital.

The Consortium immediately contacted the hospital's Governing Board of Directors Chairman, Troy de Chabert-Schuster, but the chairman said he only knew of one doctor who had resigned a week prior, and had no knowledge of the recent resignations. On Wednesday, however, Mr. Schuster said he was made aware of the latest resignations after speaking to this publication by the hospital's acting CEO Richard Evangelista.

Also today, Senator Kenneth Gittens visited the facility after being told by concerned employees of the occurrence. He met with the two doctors, who relayed to the senator their frustrations.

"I was very concerned when I heard that two of the hospital's emergency room physicians had resigned this week. I was concerned primarily because this not only affects the attention that can be given to each patient but it also affects the workload of other support staff and creates a trickle-down effect of burnout and low morale among them," Mr. Gittens said.

The doctors who resigned were Lorenz Spengler, who left about a week ago after ostensibly receiving a better offer elsewhere, along with Leslie Burton and Jennifer St Croix, both of whom resigned yesterday -- even as J.F.L. was scrambling to retain them.

Mr. Gittens said the physicians cited working long hours, which translates to tiredness and non-competitive salaries as their main reasons for separating from the hospital. He said these are things that can be assessed and corrected in order to ensure consistent quality care for the patients.

"Working in the Emergency Room is already a very high-stressed assignment. We are compounding the stress levels of the physicians when they are put in situations where they have to work more than their usual 12-hour shifts on a regular basis and at salaries that are not attractive enough to keep them here," Mr. Gittens said.

The senator also asked the parties involved to reconsider the resignation of the physicians and open discussions that may help with them returning to their duties at the hospital. He said he is urging the hospital's board and administration to look into increasing the number of emergency room physicians on rotation to end the cycle of fatigue, burnout and ultimate resignations among them.

"We are playing a dangerous game when we have people in these sensitive positions overworked," Mr. Gittens warned. "We need to get focused on increasing the number of permanent physicians on rotation. When physicians are fatigued and rendering patient care, it increases the risk of errors on the part of the physicians, and we just can't afford that."

Mr. Schuster told The Consortium this afternoon that the hospital would have locum tenens -- physicians who work on a temporary basis -- in the E.R. by next week, which he said should remedy the problem; an assurance he said had helped in convincing the last two doctors to stay with the hospital.

Feature Image Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC.