

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Gun Violence Injuries Make Up Large Part Of Schneider Hospital's \$25 Million Uncompensated Debt, Officials Say

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Doctor and nurses wheeling patient in gurney through hospital corridor

ST. THOMAS -- Gun violence isn't only affecting the victims and victims' families. The problem is also greatly impacting the territory's hospitals' financial stability, as made known by Schneider Regional Medical Center CEO Bernard Wheatley at a Committee on Finance Budget hearing at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall Tuesday, where the hospital requested several millions more than the Mapp administration-recommended allotment of \$22.5 million for the hospital's fiscal year 2017 budget.

Mr. Wheatley said S.R.M.C. owes over \$31 million to vendors; and the hospital is on track to realizing a total net loss of \$14.4 million. He pleaded with senators to consider the medical facility's additional funding request, noting that S.R.M.C. has only grown in the amount of care that it provides to a wide array of patients.

"You can't do it all by just the hospital. It needs a little bit of TLC [tender loving care] service to help run this big organization. This is not a clinic; this is a major hospital," Mr. Wheatley said. "We're doing the best that we can with cost reduction and revenue enhancement, but we need a little bit of help. The hospital is not broken, it just needs tweaking."

Along with other pressing issues, a major problem is uncompensated care -- the total amount of health care services, based on full established charges, provided to patients who are either unable or unwilling to pay -- with a majority of the total being gun violence victims. According to hospital officials, uncompensated care totaled over \$25 million.

Senator Kurt Violet said the violence problem must be addressed because its impact is far-reaching.

"One of the issues that we have in the Virgin Islands is the widespread violence that's taking place. And a number of these individuals that are getting shot, getting stabbed, are in intensive care for a long period of time, don't work, have not insurance and [are] not covered by anybody and this government end up bearing the cost," Mr. Violet said. "And until we could really get a handle on the violence, that uncompensated care is going to continue to increase.

"You just look at the number of individuals that have been shot on the island of St. Thomas this year and past away, all of them went through Schneider Hospital. All of them received all of the services that you could have provided to try to save their lives. And more than likely, 95 percent of the services that you perform on them have not been paid for," he added. The hospital's CEO agreed with Mr. Violet's assessment.

Mr. Violet said public officials often get blamed for the high level of crime in the territory, "But my position has always been that a lot of these parents, a lot of the wives [and] girlfriends know that on a regular basis their significant other is walking home with a gun; is involved in some type of incident and it's okay for them. And until it becomes not okay for that type of environment in the Virgin Islands, every other entity is going to be impacted," he said.

Mr. Wheatley said S.R.M.C. also track other trauma that go uncompensated, including blunt trauma (two-by-fours and bricks), stabbings and rape. "Sixty-five percent of those patients have no insurance," he said. "So the gunshots is prevalent, but there's a lot of other stuff coming in," including motor vehicle accidents.

Senator Positive Nelson asked whether there was a mechanism that could be put in place whereby the hospital checks the assets of certain individuals who do not pay their hospital bills.

"An individual comes in, he's been stabbed or shot but he's loaded down with about \$15,000 to \$20,000 worth of jewelry, and a \$60,000 car -- but he can't pay -- then what?" Mr. Nelson asked. "I mean, how can I feel good paying my large insured rates when

these individuals making free money, getting free care, but we have to pay for it."

"I'm not trying to flush out anyone here but how it is that they're out there gang-banging and we're paying the cost for that? It's not fair," Mr. Nelson said.

Gun violence deaths in St. Croix [over the weekend](#) brought the territory's total to 37 this year, with 24 involving guns in St. Thomas, another deemed an altercation and yet another as a vehicular homicide. St. Croix's total is 12, with 10 being gun deaths and two victims who died when their moped was [struck by a truck](#), and [one vehicular homicide](#) in St. John.