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Schneider Hospital CEO Says Anything Below \$25 Million in 2021 Budget Would Weaken Hospital's Covid-19 Response, Lead to Salary Shortfalls

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Schneider Regional Medical Center

At the Committee on Finance's fiscal year 2021 budget hearing on Wednesday, Schneider Regional Medical Center (SRMC) Interim CEO, Dr. Luis Amaro, sought to justify the need for at least \$25 million in executive appropriations to combat the impending increase in pandemic-related hospitalizations as a result of frequent and full flights beginning to enter the territory.

Senator Oakland Benta relayed that Spirit Airlines, effective Wednesday, would begin daily flights to St. Croix. The airline also lifted its seat spacing restrictions, with the ability to fill flights to maximum capacity of about 175 seats.

“We’ve opened the floodgates, and I’ve warned them about doing this,” Mr. Benta said. He then inquired about what SRMC is doing now to prepare for a potential Covid-19 crisis, as he felt that the anticipated budget for supplies was insufficient.

In response, Mr. Amaro stated that any shortfalls in appropriations would be a detriment to the territory as it relates to the coronavirus. He added that in order to “engage this warfare”—the fight against the pandemic— and stay ahead of the game, SRMC needs funding for medical supplies and personnel for fiscal year 2021.

Mr. Amaro stressed the hospital's budget remain at \$25 million, instead of the budgeted \$22.5 million from the Bryan administration. If this amount is not received, SRMC anticipates shortfalls in funding its operations, to include salaries for medical employees and meeting their uncompensated care costs, according to Mr. Amaro.

Senator Kurt Vialet agreed that this matter should be seriously reconsidered by the committee as SRMC also runs the Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center on St. John, to ensure that the medical facility continues to provide quality health care on both islands. Mr. Vialet also clarified that the submitted fiscal year 2020 appropriation for Schneider Regional was \$22 million but was marked up by the Senate, given similar considerations.

The possibility of a health crisis in the territory once again beckons what it would take for Governor Albert Bryan to walk the territory back to the “Safer at Home” phase.

At last week's territorial Covid-19 response update, Mr. Bryan said, "I think it would take people showing up at the hospital, showing that we have a surge for us to be identifying cases and where they are being identified coming from community spread.”

It remains to be seen how this influx of travelers into the territory will affect the number of pandemic-related hospitalizations and the overall health of the territory in weeks to come.