

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Town Hall, J.F.L. Officials Talk E.R., Psych Ward, Retaining Nurses, Partnerships And More

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ST. CROIX -- Officials of the Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center opened a town hall meeting held at the hospital on Tuesday evening, acknowledging some of the problems the hospital currently faces, including the drainage and A.C. issues. After opening remarks, Richard Evangelista, the facility's acting chief executive officer, took questions from the audience, responding to those he could and directing others to a team of hospital leaders who sat behind him.

At the brief town hall, questions ranged from psychiatric ward details, to the hospital's efforts in retaining nurses. A community member even offered to help the hospital with simple tasks, which she said would allow J.F.L. to focus on the more taxing problems.

On the psychiatric ward, Mr. Evangelista said the hospital's current facility was in the process of being renovated with a \$1 million allocation from the government, an initiative he said began with his predecessor. The acting CEO said the architect behind the design of the facility has returned blueprints, and that after receiving approval from the executive team and the hospital's board of directors, work would move forward.

Yet the \$1 million allocation was only for the renovation of the unit; there's currently no funding for personnel. "As you know, you see persons in the community and it's an unfortunate state that we can't even take care of them here at home," Mr. Evangelista said.

Currently, the hospital treats and stabilizes anyone that visits the emergency room with behavioral problems, but with no facility to house them, they are then released back into the community. "The hospital's emergency department is not an inpatient unit, nor is it an area for acute patients beyond the stabilization phase," he said.

The hospital does have a behavioral holding area that will be ready for patients by September 1, according to Wanda Ruben, J.F.L.'s new chief nursing officer. She said part of the reason for the holding area is to create an environment free from distractions, especially for patients with psychosis. J.F.L. now has two psychiatrists.

Mr. Evangelista proudly reaffirmed that the hospital was found to be in compliance with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' (C.M.S.) Medicare Conditions of Participation. He also said that the emergency room's move from its current location to the Cardiac Center was progressing smoothly, noting that it will be a much more modern facility compared to the current E.R.

The hospital continues to face a major recruitment and retention issue, with nurses leaving the hospital for better opportunities on the mainland. Asked by The Consortium about J.F.L.'s plan to address the problem, Mr. Evangelista said there wasn't much that could be done because of the hospital's financial position. Ms. Ruben, however, asserted that the notion that nurses leave hospitals for opportunities elsewhere only because of money, was not true. She spoke of continuous and good educational programs, clear communication with administration and team work as the top qualities nurses use to determine whether to work at a facility.

Gubernatorial candidate Albert Bryan asked whether the hospital was looking into telemedicine to address some of its specialty needs such as genitourinary surgery and endocrinology.

"These are some things that we pay as Virgin Islanders thousands of dollars to go to the states in order to access them, and really they just read the labs or MRIs or whatever it is that they're looking at," Mr. Bryan said.

He also asked whether the hospital was considering partnerships with larger firms that would add confidence to the hospital system in the territory.

Mr. Evangelista said he chairs a local telebehavioral health task force, which was recently provided funding by C.M.S. for a pilot telemedicine program to be utilized by local healthcare facilities territory-wide. Mr. Bryan's question on partnerships with larger facilities was not addressed. However, in July, the hospital [did announce](#) a partnership

with Metro Pavia Health System — the largest network of affiliated hospitals in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean.

At the end of the event, Mr. Evangelista thanked hospital staff, who he said continues to provide quality health care to ensure patient safety on a daily basis.

Feature Image: J.F.L.'s new chief nursing officer, Wanda Ruben, left, stand to address town hall attendees at J.F.L.'s Cardiac Center conference room on Tuesday. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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