

The Virgin Islands Consortium

As JFL Staggers, Dept. Of Health Steps In. Hospital's Operational Capacity At 'Critical Level,' Health Commish Says

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ST. CROIX -- The Juan F. Luis Hospital has been under immense pressure as of late, after a brief period of relief. It had just received good news in July from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, when it was found to be in compliance with C.M.S.'s [conditions of participation](#). But the hospital's problems have compounded, and issues that were once unknown to the public (mold in operating rooms, morgue issues, haphazard storage of hazardous waste and leaks in the roof, to name a few), have been brought to light.

Now, C.M.S. is once again [looking directly at the beleaguered hospital](#), warning the facility that it must adhere to conditions of participation rules. "As a participating provider, you must be in compliance with applicable federal laws and regulations related to the health and safety of patients, proper handling of biomedical wastes and hazardous chemical waste, provision of a sanitary hospital environment to avoid transmission of infections and communicable diseases, and other key requirements," reads a letter penned on Friday by the agency's Division for Survey and Certification Branch Manager, Lauren Reinertsen.

Now, the Virgin Islands Department of Health (D.O.H.), which has regulatory authority over the hospital and all healthcare providers in the territory, has stepped in, with its commissioner making two stops to the hospital today for meetings.

According to a release issued by D.O.H. today, Health Commissioner Michelle Davis and the hospital's acting CEO, Richard Evangelista, met to discuss a variety of issues the hospital has been experiencing, including the following: deterioration of sewage lines, ongoing roof leaks and conditions of mold in the operating rooms, storage of hazardous materials/biomedical red bag/bio hazard/sharps, biomedical waste at the rear of the hospital, and ventilation issues in the morgue.

"We are focusing on addressing the health and safety of the VI community that utilizes J.F.L. for health care," Ms. Davis said. "The Department of Health will be convening with other agencies to get J.F.L. back up to speed."

D.O.H. said it has reviewed J.F.L.'s plan to address the myriad of issues it faces, and was satisfied with the strategy. D.O.H. also said that it's been in contact with C.M.S. to assure that the hospital is adhering to the federal agency's regulations.

Ms. Davis told The Consortium this afternoon that D.O.H. would play a much more active role in J.F.L.'s operations moving forward.

"All healthcare facilities should have more oversight from the D.O.H., including J.F.L.," Ms. Davis said. "The hospital should manage their organization with health and safety as the number one priority. The Department of Health has consistently communicated with J.F.L. on a routine basis; this crisis has necessitated more vigorous action."

Asked why the department was stepping in now and not before the crisis, Ms. Davis said, "The first priority of the D.O.H. is the health and safety of the population. The number of issues being faced by J.F.L. has brought their operational capacity to a critical level. The Department of Health now also has knowledgeable employees who can focus their attention on regulatory processes. In fact, as I respond to your questions we are having an inter agency meeting at the J.F.L. Hospital."

Governor Kenneth Mapp has long sought to change the structure of the territory's hospitals, and the J.F.L. woes may serve as an opportunity to implement sweeping changes. [In April 2015](#), Mr. Mapp said compensation for the hospitals' officials, including the CEOs, COOs and CFOs, along with the fringe benefits, carried a price tag of over \$2 million dollars. "So you've got literally \$2 million that you're paying six people to run what's now available, which is 167 beds. Not the 500 that the hospitals were originally built to accommodate," the governor argued. Mr. Mapp has called for one CEO to run

both hospitals.

Mr. Mapp also in 2015 had determined that then-acting commissioner of D.O.H., Phyllis L. Wallace, would serve as “the chief health officer in the territory.” The governor had charged Ms. Wallace to “first and foremost lead our proposed reformation of the hospital systems in the Virgin Islands.” It's unclear whether D.O.H.'s deeper involvement in the operations of the Juan F. Luis Hospital would serve as the beginning of the governor's 2015 vision.

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