

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Senators And Health Officials Apologize After Hearing From Families Of Deceased Medical Evacuees

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ST. THOMAS -- The adverse conditions that U.S. Virgin Islands medical evacuees faced after being airlifted out of the territory to various U.S. mainland states following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, have been document by The Consortium and other publications in several written pieces. And a number of senators have visited the evacuees and have seen firsthand the situation of some, vowing to evacuees to do what they could to help.

But it was during a Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services hearing on Tuesday at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall, that senators, Mapp administration and health officials offered mea culpas, with Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly apologizing on behalf of the entire government for the manner in which the process unfolded, and

Department of Health and hospital officials, while stating that they had worked hard to evacuate residents in the humanest way possible under the worst of circumstances, admitted that more could have been done.

"The only response to what we just heard is, I'm sorry," said Deputy D.O.H. Commissioner Reuben Molly.

The apologies followed testimony provided by the family members of evacuees, who shed light on the difficulty of seeing loved ones in unfavorable conditions and feeling a sense of helplessness as they withered away.

About 49 evacuees have died, and the number continues to grow.

The testimonies of two families tugged at the heart of lawmakers and other government officials. "My dad was not an animal, he was a human being," said Luz Correa-Chesterfield, who gave an account of the situation that led to her father's death.

Ms. Correa-Chesterfield, whose father died in Puerto Rico at age 90, had been in the Schneider Regional Medical Center (S.R.M.C.) for a knee replacement surgery, but was airlifted to Puerto Rico before the procedure was performed. Concerned about their dad, family members went to Puerto Rico to check on him, only to find their father in a tent outside the hospital with sores all over his body, and with clothes that needed to be washed.

Ruby Simmonds Esannason, a former senator, said "negligence" amplified the conditions of the medical evacuees, and most likely contributed to their deaths. She too, revealed how a family member had died after being airlifted. The situation cut deep because this family member was her son-in-law, a former police officer who was shot three times in the line of duty in 2012, and had become a dialysis patient.

"He survived being shot three times in the line of duty, but did not survive being evacuated from his home," Ms. Simmonds lamented. She said her son-in-law, who was a healthy man, had lost 40 pounds following the evacuation and eventually died.

Senator Samuel Sanes's angst was on display at the hearing when he said, "This government has failed; with all due respect, the loss of life is not a freaking teaching experience." And Senator Janette Millin Young, who has visited evacuees in Atlanta, said the situation represented a case study of all that could go wrong.

In October, The Consortium [reported on the deaths of three medical evacuees and the frustration](#) of those who said they felt abandoned by their government. Following our report, D.O.H. Commissioner Michelle Davis said the department [would work to improve its communication](#) with the patients. In November, medical evacuees [described themselves](#) to The Consortium as "The Forgotten Virgin Islanders", again protesting the government's seeming lack of care for its people.

And earlier this month, someone in Atlanta who is intimately involved in advocacy for the medical evacuees there, who requested anonymity to speak freely, [said](#), "It's as if they're waiting on them to die. The federal government no longer wants them and the local government doesn't seem to care."

The effort to airlift hundreds of medical patients out of their homes, in this case the Virgin Islands, to locations across the U.S. for medical care, was carried out through a program

called the [National Disaster Medical System](#), which has been used for years to transport hospital patients out of disaster zones for treatment to unaffected hospitals.

In a recently issued release, Senator Dwayne DeGraff, who visited patients in Atlanta, said he learned that care for the roughly 200 medical evacuees being treated on the U.S. mainland was costing the federal government, through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about \$1.6 million a month.

“We need to come together to work on a holistic plan to address the needs of our residents as they return home,” he said. “Some of them may have homes that were destroyed and may need assistance with that, as well as other needs.”

### **Correction: April 11, 2018**

A previous version of this story stated that the former officer who died as a medical evacuee was Ruby Simmonds Esannason's son, when the officer was actually her son-in-law. We've updated the story to reflect the correct information.

*Feature Image: Schneider Regional Medical patients land on St. Croix near the Juan F. Luis Hospital following Hurricane Irma, to be evacuated to medical facilities in Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)*