

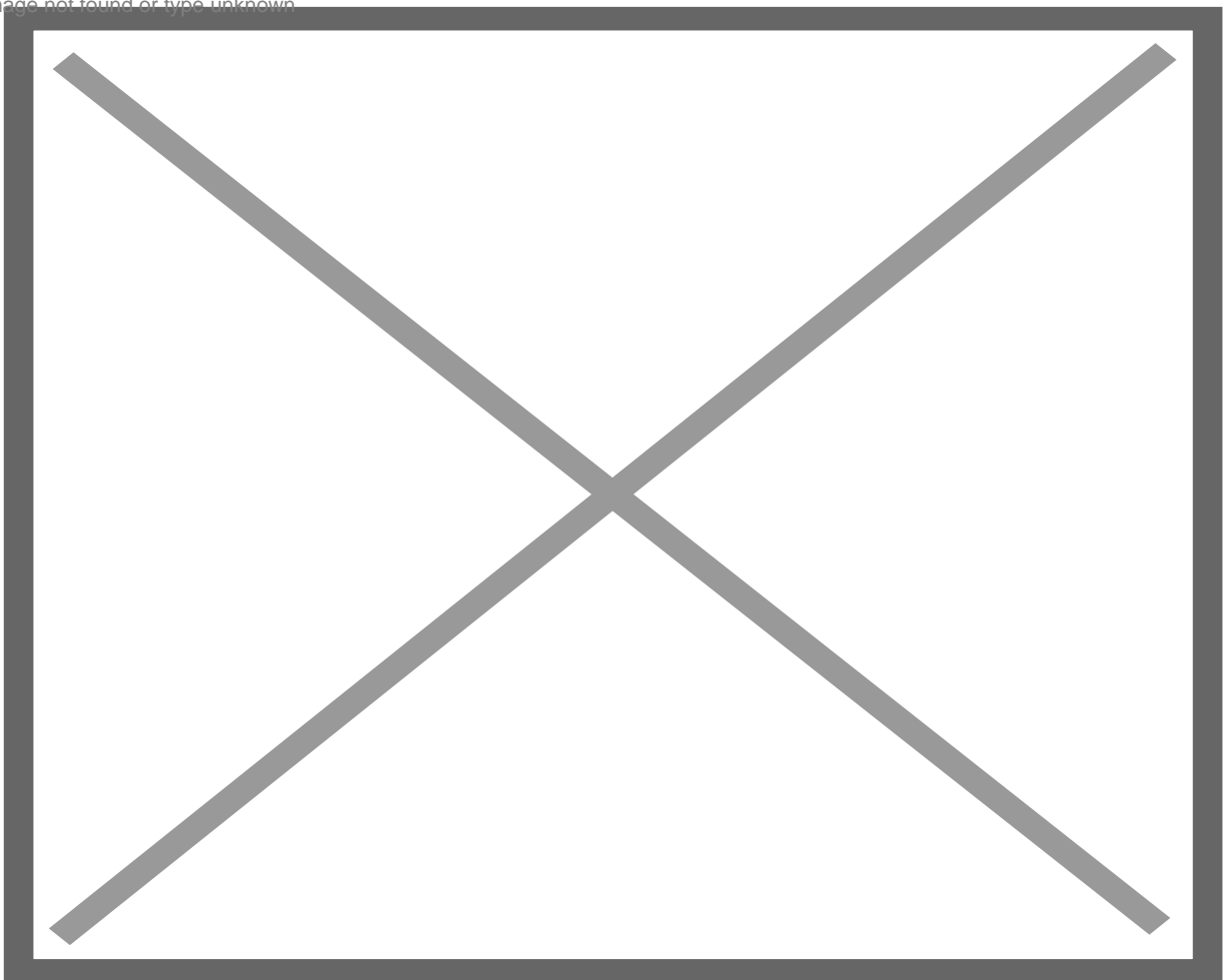
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Senators Refuse to Accept St. Croix's Delayed Modular Hospital Projected Opening Date of 2022: 'Even if We Have to Take Night and Make Day, We Cannot Wait Until April 2022'

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Side shot of JFL North, the modular medical facility to serve as an interim while the new hospital is being built. Hospital officials say the facility won't come online until April 2022, worst case scenario. By. VI CONSORTIUM

As the Juan F. Luis Hospital North, St. Croix's temporary modular medical facility continues to experience opening delays, April 2022 was projected as the worst-case scenario by J.F.L Interim C.E.O Dyma Williams during a hearing in the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services on Friday.

This timeline would be nearly four and half years after Hurricane Maria badly damaged the main hospital, and senators deemed the timeline "unacceptable."

During testimony, Ms. Williams said the biggest obstacle was the need for a cement mechanical unit (C.M.U) used to house all the technical support for the infrastructure of JFL North. She said the facility had to be constructed because the initial plan to connect JFL North directly to the existing utility, sewage and medical gasses was rejected by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

Ms. Williams had spoken about the possible protracted delay [during an interview](#) with the Consortium early April.

Senator Novelle Francis, who chairs the committee in which the hearing was held, asked Ms. Williams, "Did I hear you correct that you're saying that the possibility of opening the J.F.L. North was the fall or as late as April of 2022?" She responded, "Yes sir, worst case scenario in terms of the build out of the C.M.U. building, worst case scenario would be April of 2022."

"April 2022 is unacceptable, we cannot, should not, and would not accept April 2022 for the opening of J.F.L [North]," Mr. Francis responded passionately. "I'm telling you, this community deserves better than that. Even if we have to take night and make day, we cannot wait until April 2022 for us to open up J.F.L. North."

Senator Kurt Vialet shared a nearly verbatim sentiment during his round of questioning, "April is not acceptable at all."

Ms. Williams said that once construction is complete, the final two steps would be the commissioning of the building followed by C.M.S. certification.

It was also revealed that JFL did not have engineers on staff, another matter that confounded lawmakers.

"You need an engineer, you need a background to assist in avoiding many of the issues I saw here in the testimony," said Sen. Marvin Blyden.

Senator Samuel Carrion asked what was the rationale for not hiring engineers. Ms. Williams said a hospital build is very niche-specific and JFL needed to make sure that potential engineers have the skillset specific to the industry that they are serving. In absence of hiring engineers, the interim C.E.O. explained that hospital executives would pursue a healthcare-specific firm for project management. This would ascertain that "we connect with industry experts within the healthcare arena," Ms. Williams said. She also stated that two two local engineers were hired but both have since left the project.

"Your rationale sounds kind of convincing but ... having no engineers on board really puts you at a disadvantage," expressed Mr. Carrion.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory said, "I strongly recommend you get an engineer on board."

Mr. Blyden's opening statement during the second round of questioning summed up the issues brought to the Senate's attention: "It is clear that J.F.L. needs to have an intel engineer on staff; it is clear that 2022 April is not an option for the opening of the new facility; and also it is clear that the evaluation committee, the board and J.F.L. staff need to get together and really have more

communication and have an honest and firm discussion on how they are going to proceed.”

Senator Janelle Sarauw sought to learn more about the hiring process at J.F.L. after a woman who was employed at the hospital for two years as a certified medical assistant was let go between January and February following an audit of hospital records. The audit [revealed](#) that the woman did not have the credentials to perform the work of a CMA.

Terri Lynch, acting chief of Human Resources, stated that JFL uses a company called [Precheck](#) for background checks. Ms. Lynch was asked by the senator if this company picked up the incorrect documentation, to which Ms. Lynch said the company did not. According to Ms. Lynch, because of this failure, J.F.L. implemented a new process for 2021 called “primary source verification” in addition to the background check.

An example of primary source verification that Ms. Lynch gave was that if JFL was reviewing a potential candidate with a degree from the University of the Virgin Islands, JFL would call U.V.I. directly to confirm that the applicant graduated from the university.

Ms. Sarauw further inquired as to whether this new process has been used to certify current files. Ms. Lynch said this was an ongoing process that JFL projected will be completed by June 2021.

Ms. Sarauw asked if those files submitted by the recently let-go employee were turned over to the Attorney General's Office. “That was referred over to legal counsel and I do believe that it was referred along with other cases,” said Ms. Lynch

Ms. Sarauw said, “When we do things like that we jeopardize the quality of patient care.”