

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Gov. Bryan: One Chief Executive and a Single Health Care Policy Board for the Territory's Hospitals

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Possible leadership changes at the Schneider Regional Medical Center and the Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center could become central factors in the way Virgin Islands hospitals are managed.

With Schneider Regional CEO Bernard Wheatley expected to step-down, and Juan Luis Hospital currently guided by an acting chief executive officer, Gov. Albert Bryan told the Consortium this week that the notion of placing both facilities under one CEO is being explored.

At his weekly Government House press briefing, Mr. Bryan also said the administration is gauging the temperature of the territory's medical community about a plan to shrink the St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix district hospital panels into a single board that sets policy at the medical facilities on all three islands.

Under the plan, the central government would setup less influential district "subcommittees" for St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix.

To be clear, there has been no job postings or official announcement about executive changes at Schneider Regional, Juan Luis or the Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center on St. John. However, the job search to replace Mr. Wheatley has quietly been underway.

Calls to Mr. Wheatley at Schneider Regional were not returned on Tuesday. Hospital and government officials were reluctant to go on record. Mr. Bryan said there is not yet a short-list of potential hires.

As it stands, the current three-board structure that oversees hospital management in the districts has been somewhat inefficient and problematic.

The current, 15-member territorial board is responsible for setting hospital policies at the broadest level. Smaller, nine-member district boards are policy-makers at Schneider Regional on St. Thomas, Juan Luis Hospital on St. Croix and the Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center on St. John.

Mr. Bryan is currently gathering opinions and information from health care professionals in the St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix districts about the plans, he said.

"We've been having a lot of discussion about how we can get the hospitals to work more efficiently by working together," the governor said.

Take the inefficiency of multiple hospitals in a single medical care system using vastly different procurement and contracting systems, Mr. Bryan said.

"(Schneider Regional) has a fully functioning procurement system. ... We've been having extensive trouble with JFL in terms of their lacking in capacity and procurement. If JFL is having a problem, they should be able to count on their sister hospital to bring us forward," the governor said.

The objective, he said, is a health care system "... that provides high quality care, but gains efficiencies of working all three hospitals along the same procurement and contracting (systems). So whether you are in Myrah Keating, JFL or Roy Lester Schneider, it's the same system using electronic health records" and contracting systems.

A part of the transition laid out by Mr. Bryan is the potential for one chief executive to be based at either the Schneider Regional or Juan F. Luis Hospital.

Mr. Wheatley came to Schneider Regional in 2013 as an experienced administrator during a time when the hospital already faced serious financial, staff recruitment and public relations troubles. At the time, the hospital had gone the previous two years

without a permanent chief.

Since then, catastrophic hurricanes devastated medical facilities on all three islands. Mr. Wheatley saw Schneider rebound slightly more robustly than its sister hospital. But he faced other public relations crises.

On St. Croix, the federal government [has begun spending millions](#) (\$10.5 million) to begin rebuilding the JFL facility. The Federal Emergency Management Agency funds for reconstruction come some two years following Hurricane Maria's devastation to St. Croix. The \$10.5 million is part of \$80 million that FEMA has approved to replace the hospital.

"What we want to be able to do is have an efficient health care system that you are not only able to go into and exit very smoothly," Mr. Bryan said. "There is no hidden agenda except than to make sure that people get quality health care ..."