

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senate Encourages Local Hires At Schneider Medical Center

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Kyle Murphy **July 23, 2021**



After hearing that Schneider Regional Medical Center has over 50 critical vacancies Senator Novelle Francis, who chairs the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services, commended the hospital on its ability to retain graduates of the University of the Virgin Islands nursing program during a budget hearing on Friday.

After sharing his positive statement about retaining graduates Mr. Francis sought to learn how important it was for S.R.M.C to embrace the local nursing students.

Luis Amaro, Interim Chief Executive Officer of S.R.M.C explained that the hospital has a specific interest in hiring locals, whether graduates from U.V.I or abroad because “they have the ownership, they have the buy in to give back to the community and to be able to serve the community because they grew up and live here.”

He mentioned that the students that graduated U.V.I.’s program train in S.R.M.C during their schooling and “have a particular knowledge of our efficiencies, of the things that we do and it becomes a seamless transition once we can encourage them to come into the hospital and we can do the things we need to do to retain them.”

Mr. Francis said “As the Chair of Health, Hospital and Human Services Committee we have been advocating for similar hires from the University of the Virgin Islands on St. Croix.

In his testimony, Dr. Amaro shared that the hospital has “ a strong relationship” with the University of the Virgin Islands and in the past three years that Schneider Regional Medical Center has hired 34 U.V.I. nursing graduates. Currently 79% of their full-time and part-time staff are U.V.I. graduates and 87% of SRMC’s head nurses, clinical care coordinators, and nursing administrators are U.V.I. graduates.

According to the testimony S.R.M.C has “engaged 11 new graduates who are awaiting the outcome of their RN/NCLEX exam. Two of those graduates are currently employed at S.R.M.C. in other capacities.”

Senator Kurt Violet, chairman of the Committee on Finance, said that the “numbers are very good” but inquired if there was a graduate nurse program at the hospital to accommodate future nurses that are still working on passing the NCLEX exam after graduating. “You have somehow been able to capture them after they passed the NCLEX but how are we going to capture them as soon as they graduate from school.”

Rolda Mason, executive director of Human Resources, said the graduate nurse is not active but “what we found is that with U.V.I. students the prep that they do at U.V.I. is so well put together that students manage to pass even without the G.N. program.”

Mr. Violet responded “that’s exactly why I want the graduate nurses program because they are well prepared and if they are already on staff when they pass NCLEX then we

just need to convert them to a full R.N... if we could just develop a program as soon as they graduate, they are already doing clinicals with you, as soon as they graduate they can morph directly into the hospital take the NCLEX in 3-4 months and become a full time R.N.”

Mr. Amaro said it is a good program but there is an issue with staffing as they need experienced nurses to be dedicated to the graduate nurses “and are not entertained with the work of the hospital, which right now, given our shortages is almost an impossible thing to entertain.”

When answering a question posed by Senator Marvin Blyden about vacancies Ms. Mason said that of the 98 total vacancies in the fiscal year 2022 budget, 50 of them are in “critical” areas including nursing.

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The issue of staffing came up again later in the hearing when Senator Dwayne Degraff asked with the newly emerged delta-variant of Covid-19 if more funds were available to the hospital.

Mr. Amaro said that Covid funding has been discussed to “improve and increase our personnel.” In his response he also brought up the fact that “we are in competition” with hospitals in the United States that are paying nurses “almost as much as physicians” and “that is really hard for us.”

When questioned by Senator Janelle Sarauw, Ms. Mason explained that salary negotiations for nurses are about to start as the Office of Collective Bargaining are “soliciting dates that we can get together and do the physical negotiations.”

Mr. Violet sought to learn how much of a “deterrent” the requirement of the employees to pay into the Government Employee Retirement System was for the hospital in trying to hire employees.

Mr. Amaro said he understood the importance of G.E.R.S. but “it is really difficult.. You can’t understate what a deterrent it is, despite the need... it causes an issue. We have had people look at it and say you gotta be kidding me, I’m not signing here and giving 11.5% of my money into something that they don’t even know is going to be solvent.”

Ms. Mason said that has been instances where she has offered people the same salary for a similar position in the mainland United States that “they will be all ready to come until they realize that off the top off of that salary is going to come 11.5%.”

She also listed other factors such as cost of living and housing that make it difficult to hire employees.

According to the Post Audit Analysis “The Governor has recommended a lump sum appropriation of \$26,750,000 from the General Fund for Fiscal Year 2022. This represents an increase above Fiscal Year 2021 General Fund appropriation of \$25,000,000” for Schneider Regional Medical Center.