

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Company Tapped for Large Number of Nurses as Hospitals' Vaccine Mandate Triggers Standoff; Nurses Plan Strike; Bryan Says Hires are to Reinforce, Not Replace Current Medical Staff

Coronavirus / **Published On August 08, 2021 01:33 PM /**

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The Juan F. Luis Hospital Emergency Room. The hospital as of Friday had 29 Covid patients — the highest level since the onset of the pandemic. By. VI CONSORTIUM

Governor Albert Bryan said Sunday that the nurses being hired through Pafford Medical Services and being placed at the territory's hospitals are to reinforce staff overwhelmed by the coronavirus, not replace them.

Speaking to the Consortium, Mr. Bryan addressed a concern in the community that the new hires were being brought to the territory to replace current hospital staff who have decided not to take a Covid-19 vaccine and have made legitimate arguments regarding their decision.

The tension, which has been building, was ignited by a document issued last week from the Territorial Hospital Board calling for all medical staff to be fully vaccinated by Sept. 24, with the only exception being a waiver request for reasons such as religion or a disability.

Nurses — around 50 on St. Croix who have decided not to take the shot and another 10 or so who have gotten vaccinated but were standing with their colleagues — plan on protesting the board's decision Tuesday morning at JFL.

A portion of the Territorial Board document reads, "Colleagues who are not able to get vaccinated for strongly held religious beliefs or disability will be required to apply for an exemption. The request will then be evaluated by the hospitals' Human Resources arms. Those who desire exemption must apply by August 19."

Additionally, those who receive exemption will be required to test regularly on a schedule set by hospitals' leadership, though it will be no less than once a week.

"We know you may still have questions about the vaccine. Your hospital leadership will be holding educational sessions in the coming days to listen [to] and answer your questions," reads the Territorial Board document, even as it has already issued the mandate.

The board has estimated that approximately 55 percent of JFL and Schneider Regional Medical Center staff have received at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine.

Nurses at JFL who have decided not to take the shot for a number of reasons, have said it is unreasonable that they are not given a choice to at least test on a weekly basis when staff with religious beliefs are given the option. During a board meeting Friday, the nurses made their case as to why a choice should have been given. The board's mandate has resulted in a standoff between hospital leadership and some staff.

In tandem with the planned job action, the hospitals are being bolstered with nurses and other medical staff from Pafford Medical Services. On Sunday, Mr. Bryan, who said he was not involved in the board's decision to mandate vaccination, told the Consortium the hiring of additional staff was not a ploy to punish medical staff who have chosen not to vaccinate, but rather to undergird the hospitals — which he reminded were under immense strain.

"We didn't get the nurses to replace the current nurses, we got the nurses to support the nurses," Mr. Bryan stated. "We had 23 people in JFL on Monday; we know that this is not going away so we got the extra support. It had nothing to do with the vaccine mandate at the hospital."

Mr. Bryan did not directly comment on the board's vaccine mandate. Instead, he pointed to tragic results of a pandemic that he contends could be prevented if people were to become vaccinated.

"I think people forget that we are in a pandemic," the governor said. He also said residents should be prepared for the long haul with new variants on the horizon, among them [Delta Plus](#) which is said to be at least as bad as the original Delta.

In the end, Mr. Bryan said his main focus remains saving lives and doing everything within his power to protect the territory.

The protest at JFL takes place Tuesday at 8:00 a.m., where a large number of nurses are expected to participate in hopes of at the least being given the option to test weekly.