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Severe Staffing Issues Affecting Hospitals as Employees Are Pulled Away by More Attractive Offers, Discouraged by Cost of Living in USVI

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Ernice Gilbert **January 15, 2022**

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The Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center logo. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

The territory's two hospitals on Friday told lawmakers that they were experiencing historic staff shortages as employees leave for more lucrative opportunities elsewhere, and are further dissuaded by the high cost of living in the territory — including the cost of the Government Employees' Retirement System.

Speaking during a Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services hearing, chaired by Senator Novelle Francis, leadership of the Juan F. Luis Hospital and the Schneider Regional

Medical Center both expressed difficulty in retaining clinical staff.

"Aside from the burnout issues, staff are leaving for more lucrative travel contracts as the nationwide shortage of clinical staff continues to drive pay rates higher. Many of our critical care and support service departments lack the permanent staff we need," said SRMC interim CEO Attorney Tina Comissiong.

She added, "Our staffing shortages were further complicated during this recent surge by our own employees being infected with Covid through community spread.

"Based on an average daily census of 60 patients at the hospital, we require approximately 149 registered nurses on staff to care for them. We are significantly below the complement of permanent nursing staff we need. Currently, we only have 83 of the 149 nurses hired as permanent staff, which means we only have 56 percent of the permanent registered nurses we need on board."

Ms. Comissiong said the Emergency Room as of Friday only had seven of the twenty-one permanent registered nurse positions filled. In the Intensive Care Unit, the hospital as of Friday had only seven of fifteen required permanent registered nurse positions filled. "On the Medical Unit, we have 11 of 17 permanent registered nurse slots filled which is 65% of the permanent R.N. staff we need. On the Surgical Unit, we have 12 of our 20 permanent R.N slots filled which is only 60% of what we require," she revealed.

The recruitment of staff has also presented a challenge to the hospital, as other medical facilities with deeper pockets are offering more attractive packages. "We are being out-paced in this highly competitive landscape by hospitals that offer higher salaries, generous sign-on bonuses, reasonable cost of living, and better accommodations," Ms. Comissiong said. "We must put a real effort towards fixing our permanent staffing. While we are most certainly thankful for the temporary assistance we have received from Pafford, we must recruit and retain permanent employees vested in the Virgin Islands who are passionate about caring for their community."

Testimony from [JFL's new CEO](#), Doug Koch, reflected similarly to that of Ms. Comissiong. "Recruitment and retention of healthcare personnel has been routinely negatively impacted by the competitive short-term contract salaries offered on the mainland and in the territory, coupled with the high cost of the Government Employees Retirement System, cost of living, and the availability of affordable housing have all created a perfect storm of great recruiting challenge," he said.

Both CEOs expressed gratitude to the V.I. Dept. of Health for securing temporary staffing through Pafford.

The temporary clinical employees coming into the territory through Pafford have been receiving extremely lucrative packages, including an offering of \$20,000 monthly.

Mid-December 2021, a since-removed post on a Facebook group called "Traveling Nurse Jobs \$5,000 a Week and Up", said Pafford was offering traveling nurses \$20,000 a month to work on St. Croix, specifically in the ICU. The post read, "ICU nurses (RN) needed in St. Croix USVI. \$20,000 for 30 day contract with option to extend. I am being told it will be 3 to 4 -12 hour shifts per week. \$1000.00 bonus if you can deploy in the next 72 hours. Travel, housing, per diem and vehicle provided. This is a 1099 contract. I am not the recruiter, I am passing along information. I do not have specific salary or contract information. Send resume and any questions to the recruiter: nmoore@paffordems.com"

Ms. Comissiong said Friday that SRMC has initiated a five-year plan to become a more attractive employer, with a major priority in 2022 being retaining permanent staff. "This has to be a five-year strategic plan because we cannot solve these issues in a year," she said. "But we have to take a serious first step with a concrete strategy to develop an attractive recruitment and retention package that convinces nurses and other allied health professionals to work in the territory."

As for JFL, Mr. Koch said, "Our team continues to work diligently to create strategies to combat these obstacles and build a workforce environment conducive to high performance and increased employee retention."

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