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New JFL CEO Fires Nurse Who Brought Attention to Security Lapse at Emergency Department; Senator Assails CEO; Bryan to Look Into Matter

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Registered Nurse Michelle Montoya speaks during a nurses protest in downtown Chritiansted on Thurs. May 12 2022. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY/VICONSORTIUM

In an unexpected turn of events that is causing much consternation in the St. Croix community while inviting the ire of lawmakers, the new Juan F. Luis Hospital CEO, Douglas Koch, has fired Michelle Montoya, the registered nurse and union secretary working at the JFL Emergency Department that [brought attention to a security lapse at JFL](#). The security breach, which could have resulted in, among other outcomes, the death of employees, shook those working in the ED that night.

The breach followed a shooting incident in the Profit Hills Housing Community on Monday, May 16 that [left one man dead and another injured](#), according to the V.I. Police Department.

An incident report of the occurrence seen by the Consortium brought the matter to the attention of Mr. Koch. According to the report, the ED had two gunshot victims Monday night following the shooting, one who died and another who survived. One of the victims was brought to the ED through the waiting area, while the other victim was outside and could not immediately receive care because there was "no security to make sure it was safe."

After the surviving victim was brought inside, he was followed by another person who ran through the ED screaming, "he's going to kill me," according to the incident report, which was written by Ms. Montoya. This individual was followed inside the ED by another man who was stopped by a doctor. The first individual "disappeared into the hospital exiting the ED by the fast track hallway."



Ms. Montoya, who serves as secretary of the V.I. State Nurses Association Collective Bargaining Unit, has latitude to speak up on issues at the hospital with the goal of ensuring the safety of nurses. She spoke to the Consortium about the security breach, telling the publication that employees working the ED that night were shaken by the event, that it was unclear whether the two men who entered the ED were armed, and that the situation could have been much different.

"There was no LEO [law enforcement officer] or security in the ED or sitting in the cubby by the ED ambulance bay door," reads the incident report. "We had to page for security overhead."

Senator Janelle Sarauw took Mr. Koch to task for what she deemed a wrongful termination, contending that Ms. Montoya had not called any names and that she wasn't given due process. "What if they had gotten shot, what would be the conversation we would be having today? That woman had a right to speak up," Sen. Sarauw told the Consortium Wednesday night. "That's unfair."

The senator's comments to the Consortium follow her statement on the Senate floor Wednesday, where she challenged the CEO on the termination after her office received many calls, including from employees of the JFL ED, who Ms. Sarauw said corroborated Ms. Montoya's comments on the matter.

"Two or three years ago and recently I visited the Juan Luis Hospital, and I could attest to the fact that your security does fall asleep at their post. I'm not asking, I'm telling you that that happens," Ms. Sarauw said. The senator referenced the Consortium article that Mr. Koch used as reason to terminate Ms. Montoya. She said, "That person that's in the article discussing the breach was terminated at a time when there's a shortage of nurses. So I'm a little appalled at how that situation was handled. And then on top of that, you claimed that you had an investigation and that the information was false, but then [my office] is inundated with phone calls of those who work in the Emergency Department who confirmed the situation and were indeed shaken up."

Mr. Koch has not responded to a request for comment on his decision to terminate Ms. Montoya based on his alleged investigation even though other ED employees, according to Ms. Sarauw, corroborated Ms. Montoya's statement on the matter.

Governor Albert Bryan told the Consortium Wednesday that he would look into the issue.

Ms. Montoya said she was advised not to speak until her attorney, provided by her union, meets with Mr. Koch to discourse the situation as the union intends on challenging the termination. The Consortium will be following the developments closely.