

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Nurses Tell All - Bad Treatment, Poor Working Conditions and Disrespect

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Being a healthcare professional is not an easy job but the task is especially difficult for nurses at the Department of Health and the Juan F. Luis hospital, who say that for years they have worked in hostile environments and have endured bad treatment, inferior working conditions and disrespect from partnering agencies.

Their testimonies before the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services on Friday left senators speechless. "I did not know it was that bad," said Senator Marvin Blyden.

Senator Janelle Sarauw, who is usually vocal during these hearings, said she did not know what questions to ask after hearing the challenges of nurses in the territory.

Nurses at both institutions were advocating for basic needs like “working bathrooms and clean air” and for salary increases and premiums that they were promised as compensation for their work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Where in the world do employees have to ask for clean air, bathroom facilities, adequate equipment and most importantly nursing staff,” questioned registered nurse (RN) Michelle Montoya, [who was dismissed this May from her position](#) as a union secretary working at the JFL Emergency Department. Ms. Montoya was fired for bringing attention to a security lapse at JFL that could have resulted in the death of employees.

Speaking to the poor working conditions, Registered Nurse Jacqueline Canton, who also serves as executive chair and chief negotiator of the Registered Nurse Leadership Union, shared that, “Everyday day as the nurse in charge, I receive complaints from nurses regarding upper respiratory symptoms such runny eyes, nose and intense skin issues. Others experience worse symptoms such as asthma, chest discomfort and headaches.

“Everyday nurses enter the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital to challenges with air conditioning, mold, challenges with oxygen supply, equipment and staffing.”

According to Ms. Canton, instead of operating from a safe and healthy environment, nurses at the Department of Health gather vaccines, medications, equipment and supplies daily from the “moldy modulars” to transport them to the tent and mobile vans which are located in the parking area of the now-condemned Charles Harwood Complex.

Speaking of JFL, Dr. Brittany Dawson, vice chair of the Virgin Islands State Nurses Association at the Juan F. Luis Hospital, stated, “The overall structure itself is the issue. We can't continue to patch work in a facility that's falling apart.”

Ms. Dawson said the hospital does not have the money to repair JFL to the required standard, while nurse Montoya highlighted the failing equipment at the facility.

In addition, the practitioners took umbrage with what they see as more favorable treatment demonstrated to traveling nurses who they say are offered higher pay, as well as perks like housing and transportation.

In pointing out the unfair treatment, Ms. Canton explained that, “The nurses at DOH skillfully created documents and systems of flow at the community health center to initiate and set the frame work for the Community Vaccine Center and provide the initial vaccinations during the height of our Covid-19 response.”

“All DOH nurses provided vaccines to the public every afternoon after working in the morning clinics. Eventually, outside nurses were brought and the Community Vaccination Center was moved from the moldy modulars to another venue. The local nurses were no longer needed. The outside nursing personnel were brought in, provided a spacious mold-free environment with ample staff rotating on two shifts, security, transportation and breakfast daily, while being paid more for the same labor,” Ms. Canton said.

According to the V.I. Board of Nurse Licensure records, 900 traveling nurses were brought into the territory on temporary licenses between 2020 and 2022.

Ms. Canton said St. Croix lost numerous nurses, some vaccinated and unvaccinated due to environmental conditions, staffing issues and burnout, not to mention the vigorous testing routines. "Many left for the mainland for better wages, better work conditions and of course anger grew when outside help was brought and paid \$20,000 a month, with travel expenses, transportation room and board and meals."

In addition, local nurses who performed the same work as traveling nurses received no extra remuneration for their exposure to the virus, except JFL which provided a 15 percent differential for nurses who took care of Covid patients. The same was not provided at Schneider Regional Medical Center, reportedly due to "financial reasons."

Ms. Canton said that Department of Health nurses administered vaccines and testing and were never compensated for their exposure to Covid-19.

"Out of all the nurses in the territory, Department of Health nurses were paid nothing for their work with Covid — not one dollar," she stressed.

Meanwhile, local nursing staff at these institutions are working on an expired contract and say they have been given no wage increases in five years.

According to their testimonies, 35 nurses left during the pandemic in addition to another 10 who left in the last two months. Ms. Canton said the territory would require at least 100 nurses to fill basic current staffing needs.

The current staffing at Schneider hospital is an estimated 86, JFL at 59, and DOH with six on St. Croix and five in St Thomas. "That is an estimated 145 nurses to care for over one hundred thousand people in the hospitals, and 11 for outpatient community care," Ms. Canton highlighted.

Furthermore, the nurses said they were not consulted before the vaccine mandate that required healthcare workers to get vaccinated or face termination was implemented. Ms. Canton emphasized that nurses and other unvaccinated employees were required to pay, while any citizen could repeatedly be tested for free at the health department which was supplied with ample testing material provided by federal funding from the Cares Act.

According to Ms. Canton, the hospital board and administration policy "violated" the collective bargaining agreement and implemented the mandate without input from the nurses. "The unions rallied together with our nurses and secured testing for the small number of unvaccinated nurses for one calendar year. After that each nurse had to pay \$60 a week, which amounts to \$240 a month costing \$2,880 a year," she made known.

Nurses who did not wish to become vaccinated were later subjected to weekly testing at their own cost. "As our hospital rolled out the mandate, we lost nurses due to the initial decision of vaccinate or we will terminate," she told lawmakers.

To date, Ms. Montoya said that based on hospital policy, unvaccinated nurses aren't being allowed to reapply to work, even as Covid [has been ruled as an endemic virus by the V.I. Dept. of Health](#).

“Currently, as the policy states you are not allowed to even reapply to the hospitals unless you are vaccinated. So, they’re not taking people back,” she noted.

The Board of Nurse Licensure also continues to face disrespectful behavior from Pafford VUE Center whose personnel BNL Director Carmen Vanterpool-Romney said refuses to adhere to the board’s guidelines. Pafford is responsible for facilitating the arrival of traveling nurses into the territory along with approval from BNL. They are also responsible for testing registered nurses.

“Pafford continually ignores, as Dr. Dawson said, all our guidelines and what we’re supposed to do. So, they’ll send a nurse and tell us that the nurses have been here on contract, sitting here, paid, and they want us to issue those licenses,” Vanterpool-Romney said, explaining that they have had both verbal and written discussions with the agency about the short notice for licensing from the board.

Vanterpool-Romney said she once spoke with a representative from Pafford asking them to refrain from the practice. However, the individual responded by threatening to take the matter to the commissioner and the governor and subsequently hung up the phone. Ms. Vanterpool-Romney said she later received a directive to issue those licenses which the board did.

Coupled with these issues, the U.S Virgin Islands continues to face nurse shortages and does not offer competitive salaries and benefits for nursing staff to be able to retain trained nurses and assistants.