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# Territory's Nursing Sector Faces Uncertainty as Pafford Contracts Near Expiration

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**The Schneider Regional Medical Center. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM**

The Pafford contracts are expiring in days, and senators at Wednesday's meeting of the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services wanted reassurance from hospital executives that the territory's nursing sector would not be plunged into chaos.

"I'm very very concerned," said Senator Samuel Carrion, noting that the Juan F. Luis Hospital's contract arrangement with the medical services contractor is set to conclude on May 11. "You currently have about 25 RNs [registered nurses] that are on staff through that contract. What will happen on May 12th?" Mr. Carrion asked JFL Chief Executive Officer Douglas Koch.

“I know some of them are in the ICU division. Will it be left without some nurses on some shifts?” The senator then pressed further. “What’s the plan? Today is May 3rd!”

Mr. Koch sought to reassure lawmakers. “We’ve known that this date is coming for some time, and it doesn’t mean that those people necessarily need to walk away at that point. It means that the payment structure with DOH goes away as of May 11th,” he explained. According to the JFL CEO, both hospitals have been working with Pafford to sign contracts directly, utilizing the organization as a staffing agency. Mr. Koch told senators that Pafford had recently provided the hospital with figures relating to a new contract, and also that the hospital has initiated contracts with two other staffing agencies. However, as Mr. Koch stressed, “the ultimate goal is to hire our own nurses.”

To that end, Mr. Koch noted that “with the recent completion of our negotiations and increasing the wage that we’re able to offer to our permanent nurses, we’ll hopefully continue to improve our ability to recruit and retain nurses locally.”

In earlier testimony before the committee, it was reported that union contract negotiations had been completed and signed, covering licensed practical nurses, registered nurses, advance practice nurses, nurse midwives and certified nurse anesthetists.

Following Mr. Koch’s attempts at quelling lawmakers’ concerns, Mr. Carrion admonished the healthcare executives to ensure that patient care must be prioritized when hiring decisions are being considered. “We need to ensure that our patients have the necessary staff and receive the care they need. This is an urgent matter and I hope to hear some positive outcome.”

Meanwhile, Senator Franklin Johnson questioned the JFL CEO about how well the salary offered to nurses in the territory compares to the salaries offered on the mainland, noting, “I want to know if it’s attractive that it will lure other folks who want to come home and want to have gainful employment with us?” Mr. Koch declared the territory “very competitive,” explaining “I would say we’re in that 50 percent to upper third percent of all the states in the U.S.”

Christopher Finch, chair of the V.I. Government Health and Hospital Corporation, also weighed in on the conversation about compensation. He said that he recently examined the average salaries for registered nurses across several states with consideration of where Virgin Islanders have gone to and where nurses can be attracted from. Mr. Finch revealed that “Florida and Georgia, we are right there with them, maybe even a dollar higher, but we are extremely competitive with those states. New York we would be below and that’s perhaps to be expected.”

Zeroing in on the issue of financing, Senator Kenneth Gittens questioned, “besides contract negotiations, what are we doing to retain any of the Pafford employees as regular employees of the Governor Juan F Luis hospital. Isn’t it cheaper to outright hire them at a good salary rather than hiring them through a travel nurse contract agency?”

Darice Plaskett, the hospital’s chief nursing officer, responded. “We have been in conversation with the current Pafford nurses....The newly negotiated contract agreements with the increase in the more competitive salary place us at a better position to offer them permanent employment, so that discussion is ongoing.” A few of the traveling nurses, she said, have expressed interest in coming on board as permanent staff.

JFL has also resumed its Graduate Nurse Program, hiring 10 of the 14 nursing graduates from the University of the Virgin Islands last year. Next month, The hospital intends to hire an additional

10 people from UVI's nursing program who are set to graduate next month.

Now that a new competitive compensation package is in place, the Schneider Regional Medical Center will also be onboarding new nursing staff, said CEO Tina Commissiong. She noted that with a current complement of 71 nurses, the hospital was at about 60 percent of required staffing numbers of approximately 117 registered nurses. Ms. Commissiong noted slight progress from last year, when only 56% of positions were filled.

At Schneider Regional, Ms. Commissiong said that 28 nurses have agreed to join as permanent members of staff, with 19 of that number already begun their new jobs. She said that 13 of those nurses are local Virgin Islanders and 5 are UVI graduates which speaks to the success of the hospital's outreach efforts with the learning institution. According to Ms. Commissiong, the hospital is also in communication with nurses who will be graduating from the University of Florida and recently sent a team to Puerto Rico to meet with alumni associations and recruiters.

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