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JFL North Still Needs Additional Work Before Project Can Be Considered Complete, Officials Say

Health / **Published On May 04, 2023 05:48 AM /**

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JFL North By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The Juan F. Luis Hospital said Wednesday during a Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services hearing that it has successfully transitioned patients and critical patient services to the new temporary facility, JFL North.

Hospital CEO Douglas Koch explained to the Legislature that a total of 31 patients were moved between 7:15 am and 12:17 pm on April 22nd. Meanwhile, Christopher Finch, chairman of the V.I. Government Health and Hospital Corporation reported that “before 24 hrs passed on moving day, JFL received two gunshot victims and two car crash victims. Within a few days surgical operations were conducted and the first baby has already been born at JFL North.”

According to Mr. Koch, JFL North represents a temporary hospital structure consisting of 53 inpatient beds, relatively the same number of beds previously available at JFL main. The hospital CEO also revealed that the new emergency room at JFL north is expanded, with 26 beds between the ER and the fast track areas. The facility also offers several innovative technologies which are expected to improve the quality and efficiency of services such as laboratory analysis and CT scans. This is coupled with new surgical suites built to modern standards with larger square footage.

Though Mr. Koch celebrated the move and the offerings of the new facility, he acknowledged that “while there are many nice features of JFL north, we should not forget that this is a temporary structure and that there are plenty of drawbacks and challenges that we will need to overcome in the weeks, months and years to follow.”

He added, “Our collective goal needs to be on making JFL north work for now while we focus our attention on design and construction of a replacement hospital for the St. Croix community.” Upon being probed about the nature of these challenges by Senator Franklin Johnson, Mr. Koch stressed that while the facility is impressive, there are currently space constraints in terms of accommodating visitors and support services such as case managers and social workers.

However, work is currently ongoing to ensure that these services can be housed within the critical administration building. This was clarified by Darryl Smalls, the executive director of Facilities and Corporate Development of the Territorial Hospital Redevelopment Team. In his testimony before the Legislature, Mr. Smalls noted that ground will soon be broken for the construction of that building, and that construction of the foundation is expected to commence within the next two weeks, followed by the erection of the 6,500 sq ft facility. Smalls affirmed before the Senate that “the building is scheduled to be completed and ready for occupancy by October 2023.”

Other important work set to be undertaken to complete the hospital’s transition includes the development and construction of a 5 acre lot to the east of JFL North. According to Smalls, the lot will facilitate parking and also house a 10,000 sq ft building which will provide relatively close access for medical records materials management and facilities maintenance. The executive director revealed that “our construction plans and specifications are 100 percent complete and the project will be advertised during the month of May.” Construction is scheduled to be completed by the second quarter of 2024.

The transition of remaining non-clinical personnel who remain at JFL main must also be facilitated. Mr. Smalls reported that the retrofitting of an offsite facility has commenced and will be ready for occupancy no later than this September. The facility will house non clinical support functions such as the business office, human resources and IT departments. Renovations are also required within the Virgin Islands Cardiac Center to allow the safe relocation of functions which presently remain within JFL main but are critical to the operations of JFL North. This includes non-patient functions such as the network data center and telephone communication center, as well as outpatient radiology services and outpatient diagnostic cardiology services.

Notwithstanding the other outstanding tasks, the hospital’s management has declared that the most important project to be undertaken is the demolition and eventual construction of the new state of the art Juan F. Luis Hospital. Mr. Smalls testified that “to date we have cleared the major hurdles to finally arrive at a fixed cost offer from FEMA.”

According to Smalls, an Independent Expert Panel is expected to complete their review no later than May 12th, at which point the project will then proceed to the Large Project Notification process. He informed the Senate that because this is considered a mega project – one which costs

more than \$25 million – it must be reviewed in great detail by multiple people. Congress will also be involved as they must approve the project's funding. Mr. Smalls concluded that once the official fixed cost offer is received, a request for qualifications will be released to review and establish a pool of respondents who will then be eligible to submit proposals for construction of the new JFL Hospital and Medical Center.

Following the updates from the testifiers, Senator Angel Bolques Jr. inquired, “what are the short term and intermediate needs concerning the demolition and rebuilding of JFL, and have you identified any potential long range obstacles or drawbacks that you may face during that process?” Mr. Smalls provided an encouraging response, stating, “We’ve been looking at how we’re going to ensure that we streamline this entire construction process. I don’t see that we have any drawbacks at this point in time. I think the only thing that’s holding my team and I back right now is that fixed cost offer. Soon as we receive that fixed cost offer, it’s off to the races.”

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