



U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
31st Legislature Committee of the Whole
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Acting Commissioner Duane Howell, MSHS, RRT, AE-C

Good Morning Senate President Neville James, members of the 31st Legislature of the Virgin Islands, fellow testifiers, listening and viewing audience. My name is Duane Howell. I am the Acting Commissioner of Health and I sit before you to testify on Bill number 31-0062-1, an act providing funding for the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center's Systems Improvement Agreement with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS.) Thank you for the opportunity to place on record testimony for the aforementioned bill.

Before I begin my testimony, there appears to be an inconsistency in the Bill Summary which should probably be addressed on page 3 line 2. The sum quoted here is \$6,425,000. However, the sum of the itemized listing of projects to be funded through this bill totals \$7,000,000. As of the writing of this testimony, no revisions were receiving indicating correction therefore my reason for highlight this discrepancy.

The Department of Health commends the 31st Legislature for making the corrective action plan for Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center's SIA a priority. The department supports the intent of Bill number 31-0062-1. Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center (JFL) is the only acute care facility on the island of St. Croix and we must work together to ensure the institution is operating at its optimum best in all of its clinical settings. Services provided by JFL is an integral part of the overall healthcare system on St. Croix and territory-wide.

Full compliance with the corrective actions under the System Improvement Agreement will ensure the viability and sustainability of the facility. We all are aware of the importance of any healthcare facility to bill for its services and be reimbursed by CMS and other insurance companies. We recognize reimbursement is a driving factor for healthcare facilities such as JFL in order to sustain operations. Financial assistance through bill number 31-0062-1 provides JFL with the tools to comply with the SIA entered into with CMS on November 19, 2014.

The cost of the Systems Improvement Agreement as presented by the leadership of JFL totals to \$10,324,950. However, bill number 31-0062-1 as presented will only fund \$7,000,000. This may or may not be due to the facility having other means to fund the remaining cost. However I do not have sufficient information to make such assessment at this time.

Critical and of the utmost importance to the Department of Health is the line item for the JFL's Behavioral Health Unit included in the cost plan published by JFL at an amount of \$1,500,000. The Department of Health's division of Mental Health, Alcohol and Drug Dependency Services sees over 500 clients on average each year. Nearly 10 percent of our clients are in need of acute care services at one point or the other.

Bill number 1-0062-1 does not address and fund the critical psychiatric service area. While we recognize Act 7697 provides from the CIGNA reimbursements to the Government of the Virgin Islands a sum of \$1,000,000 to the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center to rebuild

and restore the acute care inpatient psychiatric unit, it is still short of \$500,000. Re-opening an adequate acute care unit at JFL is a critical piece to the comprehensive and coordinated continuum of care needed in the treatment of persons with mental illness on St. Croix. The psychiatric acute care unit is critical in the stabilization of patients suffering acute crisis. Lack of this clinical setting reduces medical beds in the emergency department at JFL and burdens staff not equipped with clinical skill sets to treat with acute psychiatric patients.

The challenges the territory faces with mental issues are real. It is important our infrastructure is intact and functioning across all clinical settings. For public health this is not an option. It is critical to overall quality of all residents in the Virgin Islands. Senators, I ask for your consideration to amend bill number 31-0062-1 to include at a minimum of \$500,000 to ensure full funding for the acute care psychiatric unit at JFL.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to put on record the Department of Health support for Bill number 31-0062-1, an act providing funding for the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center's Systems Improvement Agreement with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS.) and concerns. I will await to answer any questions at the appropriate time.