

**TESTIMONY TO THE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, HOSPITALS &  
HUMAN SERVICES**

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Good afternoon, Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, Chairperson of the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services, Senators of the 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands present, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Douglas Koch, Chief Executive Officer of the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center (JFL). To assist with this presentation today is Chief Nursing Officer, Darice Plaskett.

Before we delve into the focus of this testimony, I would like to take a moment to express my heartfelt appreciation towards the incredible staff at JFL, the Territorial Hospital Redevelopment Team, and the Territorial Governing Board for our successful move from JFL Main to JFL North. We are proud that we have been providing patient care services for the past 13 months in the new location since we moved on April 22, 2023.

We have a critical issue of mental health in the US Virgin Islands and an urgent need for a collaborative approach to addressing this pressing concern. Mental health is a vital component of a person's overall well-being, yet individuals in our community continue to face barriers to accessing the care and support they need. As a community, we must come together to prioritize mental health services and support systems that are accessible, affordable, and culturally sensitive.

By working collaboratively with government agencies, healthcare providers, community organizations, and individuals with real-life experience, we can develop comprehensive solutions that address the root causes of mental health challenges and promote healing and resilience. It is essential that we invest in mental health resources, expand access to care, and destigmatize those seeking help for mental health concerns.

Together, we can create a more supportive and inclusive environment where all individuals can thrive and receive the care they deserve. I would now like to turn the testimony over to Darice Plaskett, who will briefly outline the current and future services of JFL.

As you know, JFL North represents a temporary hardened structured hospital with fifty-two (52) inpatient beds. This is broken down into twenty-three (23) medical-surgical beds, twelve (12) critical care beds, ten (10) labor and delivery beds, four (4) neonatal intensive care, and four (4) pediatric beds. This is relatively the same number of operational inpatient beds we had available in JFL Main before the move. JFL North also has several innovative technologies such as four surgical suites built to the latest standards and with much larger square footage. The twenty-six (26) beds emergency department has 13 general observation/treatment bays, 3 isolation rooms, 2 trauma bays, 4 fast track bays, and a separate 4-bed crisis stabilization area for behavioral health.

The behavioral health area located in the heart of the emergency department has four individualized patient rooms, one bathroom, and a nursing station. This area is basically designed for behavioral health crisis evaluation and short-term patient stabilization. JFL's medical practitioners/psychiatrist and staff work collaboratively with other agencies such as the Department of Health, Department of Human Services, the Judicial System, and community-based behavioral health services to address the care needs, medical treatment plans, discharge support, and appropriate placement of persons with behavioral health challenges. Behavioral health challenges generally refer to mental health and substance use disorders, life stressors and crises, and stress-related physical symptoms.

JFL's emergency department behavioral health crisis stabilization services can be accessed voluntarily or through emergency commitment and/or involuntary commitment as outlined in the VI Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Act.

### **Voluntary Treatment**

A person experiencing a behavioral health crisis can access behavioral treatment services voluntarily through the emergency department. The person voluntarily requesting behavioral health support is free to leave at any time after a behavioral health evaluation unless the person appears to be a threat to themselves and/or others or damage to property. In cases where the behavioral health evaluation determined the person to be a threat to themselves and/or others or damage to property, an application for emergency or involuntary commitment is initiated by the medical practitioner/psychiatrist for further behavioral healthcare and treatment.

**Emergency Commitment**

A treating medical practitioner/psychiatrist, behavioral health professional, relative, or anyone with personal knowledge of a person with behavioral health challenges who has threatened, attempted, or inflicted physical harm on themselves or another person and/or damage to property may file an application under oath to the hospital for behavioral health evaluation of the person. If the treating medical practitioner/psychiatrist determines that the person is at risk of harm to themselves or another person and/or damage to property, the treating medical practitioner/psychiatrist can commit up to a maximum of five (5) days, not including holidays and weekends for continued medical treatment. After the five (5) day period, the treating medical practitioner/psychiatrist must obtain a Court order for any further commitment, and the person may be transferred to another appropriate treatment facility for continued care and treatment.

**Involuntary Commitment**

A treating medical practitioner/psychiatrist, behavioral health professional, relative, or anyone with personal knowledge of a person with behavioral health challenges may also petition the Court for a person to be involuntarily committed for behavioral health evaluation and treatment. There is a Court proceeding relative to the petition for involuntary commitment. Based on the Court proceeding and decision, a person may be court-ordered, involuntarily committed for behavioral health evaluation and treatment.

In these cases, JFL's medical practitioners/psychiatrists and staff work collaboratively with the Court and the Department of Health to address the care needs and medical treatment plans. The person may also be transferred to another appropriate treatment facility for continued care and treatment.

**JFL's Behavioral Health Service Overview**

From April 2023 to April 2024, there have been 164 behavioral health evaluations, 60 emergency visits for anxiety complaints and 49 with alcohol intoxication. Unfortunately, this data is not broken down by voluntary or involuntary commitments. The average census can vary from 1 patient to the full capacity of 4 patients. The therapeutic space design of a behavioral health space with patient-centered spaces such as therapy rooms, social rooms, and outdoor spaces is equally as important as the safety design in ensuring a safe and appropriate behavioral health environment. As mentioned, the behavioral health area in the heart of the emergency department has four individualized patient rooms, one bathroom, and a nursing station. The current behavioral space is unsuitable for longer-term chronic hospitalization or residential care. The limited behavioral health services in the community greatly impacts JFL.

Therefore, the same patients often repeatedly need to be re-admitted to the hospital for crisis evaluation and short-term patient stabilization.

JFL's behavioral health staff has been working with the Territorial Redevelopment Team on developing a behavioral health space design for the new hospital facility. The proposal for the new acute behavioral health unit includes key patient-centered spaces such as therapy rooms, social rooms, and outdoor spaces necessary for a safe, modern, and therapeutic unit. In addition, there are 2 pediatric rooms, 4 adolescent rooms, and 8 adult behavioral rooms for crisis evaluation and acute care short-term patient stabilization.

In closing, The JFL Executive Team thanks the Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, Chairperson of the Committee on Health, Hospitals & Human Services, and all the committee members for allowing us to provide this testimony today. We stand ready for any questions that you may have.