


Potential Closure Threatens Access to Dialysis Care

US VIRGIN ISLANDS SENATE COMMITTEE ON
HEALTH, HOSPITALS, AND HUMAN SERVICES

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Thank you, Chairman Fonseca, Vice Chair Gittens, and Members of the Committee on Health, Hospital and Human Services, for inviting me and Dr. Walter Gardiner to provide testimony on the critical topics of Dialysis Services and Care and I'm hoping that your commitment to advancing solutions will lead to progress.

I am Ivette Rodriguez, Executive Director at Caribbean Kidney Center. I testify today, not only as someone who has spent more than 20 years serving the US Virgin Islands Dialysis Patients but also as someone who has personally witnessed the impacts of Chronic Kidney Disease on my family, friends and greater community.

Introduction and Background

Caribbean Kidney Center has been providing essential and much needed access to dialysis services for patients close to home here in the US Virgin Islands for more than twenty (20) years. We provide compassionate care in two locations: one on St. Croix and another location on St. Thomas. We are large enough to serve our Territory and small enough to care for the Renal Community. We are dedicated to our mission in improving the lives of our patients.

Behind the scenes, we have consistently improved and saved the lives of hundreds of Virgin Islanders suffering from Chronic Kidney Disease because when care is provided in the best possible way, there are fewer medical complications. Every day at the Kidney Center is a "Day of Miracles". Our success so far, can largely be attributed to the incredible strength of our Team with exceeding levels of engagement and unity. Perhaps one of the greatest demonstrations of our passion is that in our two decades of existence, there have been many circumstances in which our presence has meant the difference between major catastrophes and continued survival of our dialysis community here in the US Virgin Islands.

In September 2010, the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center Outpatient dialysis facility was under a Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Settlement Agreement in which CMS detailed a list of measures and requirements to avoid Termination of the Outpatient dialysis services and one of the many requirements was in fact to transfer about 33% of their patient census to the Caribbean Kidney Center St Croix for care until GJFLH improved their standards of care to the Renal Patients.

In 2012, the Roy Lester Schneider Hospital and Regional Medical Center's Dialysis Facility was at capacity and unable to receive any newly diagnosed patients and a group of our St Thomians Brothers and Sisters were receiving regular dialysis treatment in the emergency room and when I say receiving treatments via the emergency room many of them were only receiving two (2) treatments a week rather than the normal three treatments each week. Many of these patients moved to other locations to receive this life saving procedure. As a result, Caribbean Kidney Center-St Thomas was established in 2013 because for the Kidney Center doing nothing while patients suffered, deteriorated and died was not an option.

In August of 2017, a month before the 2017 Hurricanes, the St Thomas Dialysis Center, LLC informed the Kidney Center's Management Team with only one day's notice they were

temporary closing their dialysis facility and needed to transfer a number of patient's to the Kidney Center. We accepted *all* the patients. The St Thomas Dialysis Center has never reopened.

Afterwards, we were all impacted by the 2017 Hurricanes and dialysis patients were evacuated. The Kidney Center on St Croix provided uninterrupted dialysis treatments to those patients who refused to transfer off Island. We've all heard in the news the horrific conditions our patients faced and the many patients who suffered and died away from their families and from home.

Following this, the Kidney Center was contacted once again by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid in December 2017 with efforts to return Dialysis Patients to the USVI after the 2017 Hurricanes and once again the Kidney Center worked closely with CMS and the Quality Insights Renal Network 3 to return patients home and provided access to dialysis care not only to the Kidney Center patient but to all VI Renal Patients.

My testimony and that of Dr. Walter Gardiner will identify obstacles of access to dialysis care in the territory.

Obstacles

Today, the Kidney Center's ability to continue caring for dialysis patients and providing essential dialysis services to the US Virgin Islands is being threatened. We are deeply concerned particularly about the ongoing challenges of hiring and retaining skilled dialysis nursing staff and having to contract with a Nursing Organization with associated increase of personnel costs and an impact of quality of care making this situation simply unsustainable. Unfortunately, Medicare's existing payment rates for PR/US Virgin Islands are unable to sustain the rise in labor Costs, high inflation, cost of medications and supplies. Both Medicare and Medicaid reimburse less than the costs of providing dialysis services.

The shortage of skilled dialysis nursing staff has detrimental effects on the overall health of our dialysis population. Recruitment and retention of dialysis skilled staff has long been a persistent challenge for us. Staff shortages and increasing labor expenses resulting from the pandemic have placed additional financial pressures on us.

To mitigate the closure of our facilities, we are continuing to explore strategies to allow us to remain viable within the community. But please understand, that if the Kidney Center closes, the local economy suffers as many local healthcare jobs will be lost, dialysis patients will be forced to travel and move out of the US Virgin Islands to seek dialysis care and the dialysis patients mortality rate will increase. The remaining resources available: RSHMC and GJFLH dialysis units do not have the capacity to treat the additional patients from the Kidney Center.

In closing, the Kidney Center has always served a higher purpose and its perseverance is crucial to the nearly 130 patients and their families we serve across the US Virgin Islands and the many other Virgin Islanders suffering from Pre-Dialysis Stage of Chronic Kidney Disease and many Dialysis patients and families visiting our majestic Islands. We want to continue to serve our community and ensure the best patient outcomes but if we close, it will be medically and

economically devastating for our community and your assistance is needed to address the magnitude of the crisis we are facing today.

We thank the Senate Committee on Health, Hospital and Human Services for listening to our concerns and thank you for assisting us to maintain life sustaining dialysis care here in the Territory.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ivette Rodriguez', with a large, stylized flourish extending to the right.

Ivette Rodriguez
Executive Director
Caribbean Kidney Center