

35th Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands
Committee on Health, Hospitals & Human Services

Wednesday, June 7th, 2023

Testimony of Aminah Saleem
VI Healthcare Foundation (VIHCF)

Good morning, Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, Chairman of the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services, other Senators present, colleagues, and the listening audience. My name is Aminah Saleem, and I am the Secretary on the VI Healthcare Foundation (VIHCF) board. I am honored to be here today to testify concerning the operational status of the Virgin Islands Healthcare Foundation's Dialysis Unit which is a 501c3 non-profit.

My involvement with dialysis came about as a caregiver for my late husband, Abdullah Saleem, who was on dialysis for four years and passed away in 2009. As we say, "Who feels it knows it." I have felt the pain of the patients and the caregivers of those who suffer from end stage kidney disease. I also happen to know it can happen to anyone of us, you or me.

As you have heard from my colleagues, we are passionate volunteers and advocates for a cause that is close to our hearts, a cause that is a matter of life and death for a significantly growing number of VI residents. It is now a crisis, and we are offering a solution.

Crisis #1.

Status: Virgin Islands Healthcare Foundation, www.vihcf.org Dialysis Unit

The build-out of the Virgin Island Healthcare Foundation's dialysis unit is 95% complete. It will accommodate 78 patients on three shifts in a brand-new, safe, and CMS-compliant environment.

Although, we appreciated being awarded \$1million in March 2022 and have used those funds wisely to totally renovate and build out the unit. We still need the additional \$941,476 of ARPA funds to complete this project. This additional funding was initially approved by the Governor, which include the cost for additional build-out due to increases in materials and labor, water purification cost, and purchasing the dialysis machines, and chairs. We are also working on raising \$750,000, which is for the initial operating cost. The operating funds are needed for the first six months until our medical insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid payments are reimbursed. After we start receiving our

payments through billing we will not need any more funds from the government. These operational funds are required by our management partner the nationally recognized 501c3 non-profit the Dialysis Center Inc. www.dciinc.org who have over 250 dialysis units nationwide.

Issue: The VIHCF dialysis unit cannot open during this hurricane season due to delays in funding. If we were open, we could house at least 78 patients, the JFL Hospital unit would be able to shut down the trailers, and patients would feel comforted to know that there are two (2) dialysis units the VIHCF Dialysis Unit and the Caribbean Kidney Center (CKC), that could negate the need for separation from home, family and friend after a disaster.

Recommendations:

1) Senators please assist VIHCF in getting the \$941,476 ARPA grant funding from OMB. Also we gratefully accept any recommendations you may have that will assist us in raising the \$750,000 in operational and staffing cost. Once we get these funds, we anticipate opening in Oct 2023.

Crisis #2.

Status: The Juan Luis Hospital Dialysis Unit Trailer (JFL)

The two temporary trailers certified by CMS officially as a Special Purpose Renal Dialysis Facility in late 2018 are now five (5) years later in dilapidated condition, with only one trailer still functioning. That trailer has to be approved monthly by CMS to use.

Issue: In the condition the trailer is in now, one bad tropical storm or Category 1 hurricane could destroy it. This scenario would leave the forty (40) dialysis patients presently served at Juan Luis Hospital Dialysis Unit with only one choice for dialysis, the Caribbean Kidney Center which cannot accommodate an additional forty (40) patients. This is the only option since the new modular hospital does not include outpatient dialysis services. We also understand the Caribbean Kidney Center has told some staff and patients that they are closing soon, creating anxiety for all the patients and causing crisis #3.

Recommendations:

1) Assist the VIHCF in getting the ARPA grant approved. We have submitted everything OMB has requested.

2) Request that all the dialysis unit stakeholders on St. Croix meet and work together as partners within the next 30 days. Schedule a legislative hearing for the week of July 10, 2023. At that hearing, have all stakeholders testify on the results and solutions for dealing with the crisis.

Crisis #3.

Status: Caribbean Kidney Center (CKC)

The Caribbean Kidney Center is a privately run dialysis unit that Dr. Walter Gardiner owns. It presently has approximately sixty (60) plus dialysis patients.

Issue: We have heard from many that Dr. Gardiner at the Caribbean Kidney Center has threatened to close his unit due to the increase for the nursing staff at the current rates.

We understand there are negotiations with Dr. Gardiner about possible ways to avoid a humanitarian crisis that would occur if he were to close. That would be a disaster there would be no place on the island for the sixty (60) patients presently being served there to go for dialysis.

However, even if the Caribbean Kidney Center remains open and the hospital trailers close down, there will not be enough capacity for all the dialysis patients on St. Croix, plus those waiting to be placed on dialysis, and off-island waiting to return home.

Recommendations:

1) We need two fully functioning, long-term dialysis units in St. Croix. Patients deserve to choose who they want for their healthcare provider.

If there is only one dialysis unit and disaster hits, either natural or man-made, unless it is declared a Federal disaster, the responsibility for getting all of the over 100 dialysis patients off St. Croix is all the financial responsibility of the Virgin Islands government. This would be a real disaster for the VI Government to have to pay from the General Fund for the relocations . As it cost FEMA in 2017 and 2018 \$40 million to send patients all over the country and pay for dialysis and housing for over a year.

Residents and patients need to be able to choose where they want to go for dialysis. They can't fly off the island three times a week for dialysis. Also, one unit has to be able to support the other in case of emergency or disaster through Memorandums of Understanding.

2) Request that all the dialysis unit stakeholders on St. Croix meet and work together as partners within the next 30 days. Schedule a legislative hearing for the week of July 10, 2023. At that hearing, have all stakeholders testify on the results and solutions for dealing with the crisis.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we appeal to you as leaders. Time is of the essence. Each delay due to a lack of funding pushes us back further and lives are at stake. This appeal is a humanitarian effort for dialysis patients, and we cannot move forward without your assistance. Thank you, for the opportunity to come before you today.