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24-hour Expanded Primary Healthcare Services Now Available on BVI's 2nd Most Populated Island of Virgin Gorda

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VIRGIN GORDA, BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS — With the official opening of the expanded Nurse Iris O’Neal Medical Centre on Virgin Gorda, the second most populated island in the British Virgin Islands, the over 4,500 residents there now have access to a wider range of preventive and treatment services 24 hours a day.

Dating back to the 1970’s, the Virgin Gorda District Clinic has been serving the needs of residents and visitors, but major services had to be accessed on the main island of Tortola.

The clinic was named in honour of Nurse Iris O’Neal, whose career began in 1939 at the Cottage Hospital, later Peebles Hospital and now the Dr. D. Orlando Smith Hospital in Tortola. She

relocated to Virgin Gorda in 1943 after marrying a local.

As the only nurse on the island, she became the District Nurse and practiced as a midwife. She performed many procedures using a kerosene lamp or a flashlight, due to little or no electricity in the 1940's and 1950's.

The original Nurse Iris O'Neal Clinic offered only 2 physicians ambulatory rooms, 1 urgent care area with 2 bed stretchers, 1 wound care management room, 1 room for dentistry with 2 dental chairs, a pharmacy station and other utility areas.

(Below, Premier Andrew Fahie, Health Minister Carvin Malone, 9th District Rep Vincent O'Neal, BVIHSA CEO Dr. Ronald Georges. Credit: Angela Burns, VIC)



It offered primary care services, urgent care, emergency services, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, oncology, community mental health, audiology, pharmacy, dental, home visiting,

wound care, child health, maternal health and family planning.

Its expansion to a poly clinic was a vision of the late former Chief Minister and Representative for the Ninth District, the late Ralph T. O'Neal, a Virgin Gordian, who in 2009, spearheaded his Virgin Islands Party government's purchase of the land.

On March 30, 2015, a National Democratic Party administration broke ground for the Nurse Iris O'Neal Medical Centre, but the project was plagued by several delays relating to designs, procuring material and hurricanes.

Speaking at the opening of the new facility on Thursday February 20, 2020, Premier and Minister of Finance Andrew A. Fahie, whose government ran with the project on assuming office a year ago, declared that this was not a political party project, rather a project for the people to understand that recovery "gonna come through us".

He made this point after he asked all labourers, government ministers, health authority board members and others associated with the project in the past and present to stand for recognition.

Premier Fahie referred to the new Nurse Iris O'Neal Medical Centre as a place where people would want to come to work, but most of all people will come for relief and to recover with the help of capable healthcare professionals that his government will ensure are available.

Government Minister Vincent Wheatley, who represents the 9th District of Virgin Gorda and Anegada, was pleased to receive several on the spot pledges from residents, businesses and others for the facility.

Pledges were already received from Larry and Lucy Page (\$150,000), North Sound Foundation (\$133,549), Road Town Wholesale (\$125,000), Rotary Club of Tortola (\$50,000), Medicare Ltd. (\$10,000) and others ranging from \$40 to \$5,000.

Dr. Ronald Georges, CEO of the BVI Health Services Authority spoke to the growth of Virgin Gorda's population which demanded expanded health services.

"One of the key principles of primary health care is equity," he stated. "Essentially, all persons should have access to a minimum basket of services regardless of their geographical residence, their income, their race or any other factor. The government's thrust to set up and now review the National Health Insurance system is to ensure we meet these lofty ideals."

The Nurse Iris O'Neal Medical Centre is part of the primary care delivery service network of the British Virgin Islands Health Services Authority, a statutory body under the government's Ministry of Health and Social Development.

"It has long been recognized that a larger, more comprehensive and better equipped facility would be required to meet the increasingly complex needs of this growing population," said Minister Carvin Malone.

He said the official opening of this two storey facility stands as a symbol of hope, resilience, transformation and promise for the residents of Virgin Gorda and surrounding communities.

"I was here when the team of Dawson Wells came to the (Virgin Gorda) Community Centre and they made presentations," Minister Malone recalled. "The community dictated that if you are from Virgin Gorda and want to have your child in Virgin Gorda, it must happen....Governments

through the years invested millions to ensure that this facility was built and will invest even more to ensure that the proper level of staffing is here.”

The new Nurse Iris O’Neal Medical Centre was designed by local architectural firm A R Potter and Associates and the \$5.9 million contract was awarded to a local as well, James Todman Construction Company.

Also speaking at Thursday’s handing over and opening ceremony, Mr. Todman noted that work began on the project in June 2015 and would have been completed in December 2017 except for the delays due in particular to the hurricanes which devastated the islands in September 2017.

While the overall cost of the project ran past \$7 million, the general contractor was quick to stress that when the project restarted in June 2018, changes were made to the original contract, hence the additional funding requirements.

Mr. Todman used the opportunity to present a \$30,000 check to the government owned facility.

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