

Amid great confusion on Capitol Hill

Public health hospital

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WASHINGTON — The effort to save the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Clifton received a boost last night when a House-Senate conference committee approved a \$97-million appropriation for the PHS system in 1982.

In the action, the panel accepted the House version of the PHS funding legislation that would provide up to \$72 million next year to help local communities take over and run the federal facilities.

On Staten Island, St. Vincent's Medical Center says it needs at least \$24 million to upgrade and assume control of the Clifton facility.

The approval of the appropriations measure followed a day of wrangling and confusion in which House and Senate members of the panel could not agree on a money figure for the bill.

The impasse over the funding arose when Sen. Harrison Schmitt, R-N.M., chairman of the Senate subcommittee on health appropriations, refused to accept the House proposal, which called for \$97 million to pay the administrative costs of eliminating the PHS system and to finance conversions of hospitals in four communities, including Staten Island.

Schmitt said the \$97 million was inadequate and urged the conference to approve some open-ended language that would enable Congress to add money to the \$55-million Senate bill whenever the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) comes up with cost estimates for the conversion proposals.

But Rep. William H. Natcher, D-Ky., Schmitt's House counterpart, balked, insisting the House measure contained sufficient money.

Richard Schweiker, secretary of HHS, had already told the two subcommittee chairman that he would need \$177 million to fund the Staten Island takeover plan and takeover proposals in Baltimore, Seattle and Boston.

At one point during yesterday's hearing, Schweiker warned both Schmitt and Natcher that HHS would have to close all PHS hospitals today unless the conference committee approved \$177 million by midnight — start of the 1982 fiscal year.

The confusion continued after the committee hearing when it was believed that the panel had approved the Senate version of the appropriations bill, which called for only \$55 million in closing costs and no money for conversion proposals.

Congressman Guy V. Molinari, one of the PHS system's most

vocal supporters, spent most of the early evening conferring with House leaders, thinking the Senate version had been passed.

It wasn't until around 10 p.m. that Molinari learned that \$97 million had been appropriated. To clear up some of the confusion, he was given time to question Rep. Silvio Conti, R-Mass., the committee's ranking Republican, on the House floor.

The colloquy went as follows:

Molinari: Mr. Conti, does this conference agreement provide continued funding for the PHS hospitals?

Conti: Yes, the gentleman from New York is correct.

Based on the recommendation ... continuing appropriations are a part of this resolution.

Molinari: Am I correct that the amount provided is \$72 million for general operating expenses and \$25 million for conversion of facilities that have approved plans?

Conti: That is correct. That is the amount recommended in the bill that will be before this body tomorrow. And that is the amount that this resolution continues.

Molinari: Does the Secretary of Health and Human Services have the flexibility under your bill to operate these facilities through Oct. 31?

Conti: The gentleman is correct. The secretary has that flexibility.

Molinari: Does the gentleman understand that perhaps four facilities located in Staten Island, Baltimore, Seattle and Boston may have approvable plans?

Conti: That is my understanding.

Molinari: Does the gentleman know if the Senate has indicated any conversion money for these facilities?

Conti: It is my understanding that they did not at the subcommittee level but that the chairman of that subcommittee may seek some funds for that purpose in full committee in the other body.