

March 13, 2023

Breaking News...

Norfolk Medical Director Out After Only Months

James Keown (MCI-Norfolk)

According to Wellpath staff, Dr. Kevin Ennis is out as medical director at MCI-Norfolk. Staff point to concerns raised by many, including DOC officials, over the doctor's performance to explain why the doctor was released after only about six months on the job. Dr. Ennis had previously been suspended pending investigation in February due to a verbal incident involving staff according to a person familiar with Wellpath's review of the doctor. Dr. Ennis, however, was cleared to return to work after less than a week.

Advocates at Prisoners' Legal Services raised alarms with the DOC and Wellpath last week when without notice officials at MCI-Norfolk began moving patients out of the Clinical Stabilization Unit (CSU), the prison's medical unit, to the prison's general population. Some staff members at MCI-Norfolk balked when one disabled CSU patient who requires assistance dressing himself, supplemental oxygen at night, and who cannot walk up steps was told he was being moved to a regular housing unit. The patient had been classified to a medical unit from the first day of his incarceration more than two years earlier.

Dr. Ennis, who was on vacation at the time, according to staff, approved the move without conducting any evaluation of the patient's ability to safely live in general population and without discussing the move with the patient. The move was also endorsed by at least one senior administrator at Wellpath's Massachusetts headquarters in Foxborough who overruled nurses assigned to the CSU who had attempted to shut down the transfer of the disabled patient. Norfolk security staff ultimately ruled it unsafe to place the patient in general population and halted the move pending a review. As of March 23, the patient remains in the CSU.

MCI-Norfolk went almost a full year without a medical director before Wellpath hired Dr. Ennis in late 2022. The loss of the medical director means that only two nurse practitioners remain to serve as primary care providers for the approximately 1,100 incarcerated people at MCI-Norfolk, including the prison's 16-bed medical unit. The lack of a full-time doctor at MCI-Norfolk is only part of an ongoing staffing crisis that has plagued Wellpath for more than a year. A recent review of the company's staffing matrix revealed almost 30 open positions at MCI-Norfolk alone. Currently, the prison has no Director of Nursing or Nursing Supervisor. The lack of staffing was a contributing factor in the DOC fining Wellpath more than \$300,000 in 2022.

Wellpath's contract to provide health care services was set to expire on June 30, 2023. Officials in the DOC's Health Services Division were expected in October to put out a Request for Responses (RFR), the first step in the state's procurement process. Instead, the department has said informally that it intends to extend Wellpath's contract for up to one year, as allowed under the current agreement, so officials

can have more time to prepare the RFR said a person familiar with department's health care bidding process.

The DOC spent more than \$196 million dollars last fiscal year on health care for incarcerated people through Wellpath, LLC., a Tennessee based corporation. Wellpath earns approximately \$1.7 billion annually and is controlled by the \$43 billion private equity firm HIG, which also operates Keefe, the DOC's commissary, property, email, and electronic tablet vendor. Last year, a federal court in Virginia sentenced Wellpath's founder, former CEO, and Chairman of the Board, Gerard Boyle, to federal prison after he pled guilty to bribing Virginia officials for health care contracts. Boyle previously had spent 15 years working for the Massachusetts DOC, including as the Superintendent of Bridgewater State Hospital.

Wellpath and HIG have consistently been under fire in Massachusetts from incarcerated people, family members, and outside advocacy groups who say the level of care provided by the corporation falls well below the standards required by law. Two 2022 reports by the Disability Law Center called out Wellpath over their lack of meaningful care and the DOC for their lack of appropriate medical housing. Many, including lawmakers, also now are questioning how health care spending in the DOC has more than doubled over the past decade when the number of people incarcerated has dropped by almost 50%.

Contact information for James Keown, W92514, Vice-Chair, Lifers' Group, Inc., P.O. Box 43, Norfolk, MA 02056

Please feel free to share.