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ISN'T DADDY'S LITTLE GIRL FABULOUS?



Some disciplined King-Harbor workers still on the job

At least 22 work at the clinics that replaced the troubled center or at other L.A. County hospitals. County officials say a computer glitch destroyed records used to track such employees.

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Los Angeles County government leaders blamed their own employees for many of the problems that forced the closure of Martin Luther King Jr.-Harbor Hospital, the notoriously troubled public medical center near Watts. Some workers had neglected patients. Others had gone missing for months. So when the hospital ended inpatient and emergency operations last August, county supervisors promised to "wipe the slate clean" of problem employees.

But a Times review of personnel data and disciplinary appeals shows that at least 22 employees with significant disciplinary histories at King either still work at what remains of the facility -- several outpatient clinics -- or have been reassigned to other county hospitals. Exactly how many problem employees from King are on the job remains a mystery.

After receiving an information request from The Times, county officials said they discovered that a computer glitch had destroyed electronic records used to track where disciplined King workers were sent after the hospital's closure.

The loss of the records system is particularly startling in light of the hospital's troubled history. The facility's medical lapses have been blamed, in part, on its failure to keep accurate records on workers' job performance. The result was that some problem employees had personnel files that looked spotless.

Some members of the Board of Supervisors expressed dismay at the Times' findings, saying they showed that the board had failed to make good on its pledge a year ago. "It frankly sticks in my craw that we have not been able to deal with the people who personified the culture that caused King to close," Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said. "We have not fulfilled our promise to clean things up."

The Times conducted its own review by comparing a roster of former and current King workers against a list of employees who have filed appeals of disciplinary actions with the Civil Service Commission. The picture is incomplete because, although such appeals are public records, many disciplined workers never file one.

According to Civil Service records, among the workers who remain on duty are:

* Danielle Jordan, a nursing attendant suspended in 2005 for sleeping while she was assigned to keep watch over patient heart monitors. Healthcare officials noted that her behavior occurred while the hospital was under "serious scrutiny" by state and federal regulators and "could have had frightening consequences" for patients.

Jordan, who could not be reached for comment, argued in her appeal that a charge nurse incorrectly assumed she was sleeping after seeing her eyes closed for a few seconds. But the Civil Service Commission upheld her 15-day suspension. Records show that Jordan was working earlier this year as a clerk at King, which remains open as an ambulatory care center only. A county health official said she was no longer working with patients.

* Reginald Clark, a nursing attendant at King who missed more than 400 hours of work through unauthorized absences and tardiness in 2002 and 2003. The absences had continued despite two earlier counseling sessions in which Clark was warned about his failure to show up to work on time -- or at all. He received a 15-day suspension.

According to his union representative, some of the absences should have been authorized because of an injury he suffered moving two bodies at King. Clark was reassigned to work at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance and withdrew his appeal after a settlement with the county; the terms were not disclosed. He was not available for comment.

* John Henderson, a longtime clerk in King's morgue who allegedly accepted payments last year from a private mortuary for steering the families of the hospital's deceased patients to the mortuary.

A hospital manager said his behavior violated federal privacy laws and could "seriously jeopardize the hospital's accreditation and our standing in the community." When King closed, Henderson was given a new job at County-USC Medical Center's mortuary in Boyle Heights.

Reached by phone, Henderson said the discipline he received was "bull and threatened to sue The Times if details of his case were published. "Those people I was working with were crack heads. You can't take their word. It was all hearsay," he said.

He said his 10-day suspension was reduced by "two or three days" during the appeals process. (Settlements are not public record, so his statement could not be corroborated.).

County health officials said they had done their best to weed out problem employees. Indeed, firings and forced resignations purged the hospital of more than 250 employees between January 2004 and February 2007.

But John F. Schunhoff, the county's interim director of health services, said managers had been stymied in some cases by rigid Civil service rules that restrict when and how workers can be disciplined. The rules call on managers to take into account an employee's length of service and prior discipline record but do not allow an employee to be fired for an instance of misconduct that already has been the subject of discipline.

Annelle Grajeda, president of Service Employees International Union Local 721, which represents most workers at King, defended employees, saying it was wrong to blame them -- or the Civil Service rules -- for the hospital's lapses.

"This sort of feel-good recrimination about the staff really doesn't get us anywhere," she said. "While I feel that individual accountability is important, it should not replace a hard look at the systemic leadership failures of the county healthcare system. And the supervisors have been very incurious when it comes to that."

County supervisors said they were surprised to learn that the database tracking former King employees had crashed. The data were designed to help alert managers if reassigned workers were accused of new misconduct.

"It's kind of embarrassing," said Supervisor Gloria Molina. "Even as a supervisor, we have not been able to get much information."

A spokesman for Supervisor Mike Antonovich said his boss had ordered county workers to recreate the database of disciplined workers.

"This information should be available and should be consolidated, and there is no excuse for this lack of oversight," spokesman Tony Bell said.

Schunhoff said he expects the data to be restored in the next few weeks.

Records provided by the county show that the 1,600 employees King still had when the hospital was closed were dispersed by sending 213 to Harbor-UCLA, 164 to County-USC and 68 to Rancho Los Amigos Rehabilitation Center in Downey. The others were sent to various county health clinics, were transferred to other county departments or remain at King.

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