



Testimony of Dan Strahinich, Vice-President
The New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, SEIU
Before the Public Health Committee
Monday, November 13, 2017

Good afternoon, Senator Somers, Senator Gerratana, Representative Steinberg and members of the Public Health Committee.

My name is Dan Strahinich and I serve as Vice-President of the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, representing the professional and paraprofessional caregivers at Connecticut Valley Hospital.

The broad systemic failures of supervision and management at Whiting call for significant changes to reconfigure the future of forensic psychiatric care in Connecticut. We ask this Committee to play an integral role in both policy and legislation.

These are our strong recommendations to protect patients and staff and preserve the integrity of mental health services:

➤ **Reconstitute Whiting Forensic as a free-standing forensic hospital**

Whiting was converted by statute in 1995 from a free-standing hospital to a division within CVH, to consolidate services and save money.

➤ **Conduct a national search for a forensic expert to serve as Director of Whiting**

The new director must demonstrate a commitment to a recovery model of care, have strong administrative skills; and report directly to the Commissioner of DMHAS.

➤ **Redesign the orientation program for all new nursing and clinical staff**

You should know that over the last five years, nursing orientation has been cut from 30 days to 20 days. We are in discussions with the hospital to revamp the orientation program and are working towards returning to the longer period, which will require additional training staff.

➤ **Reopen Unit Five for long-term patients who exhibit severe behaviors**

In 2009, the Department de-staffed Unit Five for budgetary reasons. We recommend reopening it for patients who exhibit severe behaviors. These patients require reductions in stimulation as part of their treatment protocol. It makes little sense to mix these long-term individuals with the Corrections population who routinely receive 90-day evaluations at Whiting.

➤ **Grant the Whiting Forensic Hospital automatic review status for all vacancies**

Legislative efforts to reduce the number of state workers have resulted in a 15.9% reduction in the state workforce between 2010 and 2017. Even authorized positions often remain unfilled during the many hiring freezes imposed during periods of budget shortfalls.

Excessive mandatory overtime is inimical to good patient care, unhealthy for staff and expensive for the state. The high level of acuity for numerous Whiting patients requires constant observation by up to two staff creating a frequent need for overtime staffing. We can reduce mandatory overtime by keeping necessary positions filled, given the 24/7/365 needs of a forensic hospital.

➤ **Redesign and update Collaborative Safety Strategies (CSS) based on current national best practices**

CSS needs to be redesigned to be effective, safe and clinically appropriate, following current national best practices.

➤ **Develop proactive policies to prevent and/or treat PTSD among staff seriously injured at work**

We strongly recommend that DMHAS conduct a study of CVH staff to determine the extent of PTSD and develop practices that can assist staff who have been subjected to physical and/or emotional trauma.

These structural changes can be the foundation of a forensic mental health system in Connecticut that would be a national model. We look forward to working with this Committee, the Department and the advocacy community to build that model system. Thank you.