

D-H Disappoints N.H. Health Chief
By Nora Doyle-Burr - Valley News Staff Writer
Wednesday, May 10, 2017

Lebanon — New Hampshire Health and Human Services Commissioner Jeffrey Meyers this week said he is “disappointed” with a response from Dartmouth-Hitchcock in a dispute over staffing levels at the state’s psychiatric hospital, saying the Lebanon-based health system is not taking responsibility for the issue.

Last week, Meyers sent D-H a letter stating it was in violation of two provisions of a \$36.6 million state contract for care at Concord-based New Hampshire Hospital. In particular, Meyers said D-H’s flagship hospital, Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital, failed to ensure that 11 full-time general psychiatrists and a full-time equivalent geriatric psychiatrist were on staff at New Hampshire Hospital at all times, as required by the contract.

In a response last Friday, D-H denied it was in violation of the contract, which took effect on Nov. 1, 2016, saying that the state was aware of staffing issues at the hospital and that negative statements made by state officials — including Gov. Chris Sununu — were making it difficult for D-H to hire, preventing them from strict adherence to the staffing requirements of the contract. A D-H lawyer even said statements that D-H had not fully disclosed staffing levels were “categorically false and defamatory.”

Neither side has said that patient care has been compromised by the staffing issues. Instead, the dispute has centered around who knew what when and who is responsible for finding a remedy.

Asked for a response to the D-H letter, Meyers on Tuesday told the Valley News in an email through his spokesman: “While I am disappointed that Dartmouth-Hitchcock has chosen to deflect its responsibility rather than submit a corrective action plan as requested, Dartmouth-Hitchcock has the opportunity to acknowledge the staffing deficit and to resolve this issue with the department so that our work caring for patients and addressing the State’s mental health challenges continues. I urge them to do so now.”

Meyers also indicated that he was previously in the dark about staffing issues at the hospital. “At no time since the beginning of the new contract did anyone at New Hampshire Hospital or at Dartmouth-Hitchcock inform me of any staffing deficiency that violated the terms of the contract, nor did anyone at either institution raise any concern about the sufficiency of psychiatric staffing at New Hampshire Hospital, or patient care there,” he said.

Though Sununu previously had waded into the dispute by questioning D-H’s trustworthiness and truthfulness in its reporting of staffing levels to state officials, Sununu’s legal counsel, John Formella, declined to continue to air those concerns publicly in a Tuesday email to the Valley News.

“While I strongly disagree with several of the statements contained within Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital’s response and stand by the state’s letter of non-compliance, engaging any further in a public dispute does not advance the interests of finding a resolution,” Formella said. “We will continue working to ensure that Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital lives up to the terms of the contract and that patients at New Hampshire Hospital receive the best care possible.”

Formella is a Hanover High School graduate and his mother, Nancy, was Dartmouth-Hitchcock's co-president and the president of Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital from 2006 to 2011.

D-H said in an email on Wednesday that it was glad to see that the state has not expressed concerns about patient care at New Hampshire Hospital, and also restated its assertion that it has presented accurate staffing numbers in reports to the state.

"D-H reiterates, in the strongest terms possible, that it has been fully transparent with the state regarding the exact level of psychiatric staffing provided to NHH," according to the D-H statement that came via spokesman Josh McElveen.

"D-H's position is supported by its team members at NHH, as well as documentary evidence in the form of staffing reports regularly provided directly to DHHS personnel."

In a written report provided by DHHS to the Executive Council last week, there were 8.8 full-time equivalent general psychiatrists at New Hampshire Hospital during the week of April 24 and 10 during the week of May 1. There was one full-time geriatric psychiatrist during the week of April 24, but not during the week of May 1, according to the report.

D-H also expressed concern that Meyers had responded to the news media regarding the health system's formal response, but had not responded to D-H's request for a meeting to discuss the dispute.

"We are disappointed that the commissioner has chosen to make unfounded accusations in the media, while declining to accept our request to discuss the matter directly," according to the D-H email. "We are hopeful that a meeting may soon be arranged."