

Ancora CEO says reforms underway

State psychiatric hospital
has a history of problems

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WINSLOW - Eight months into his position as Ancora Psychiatric Hospital's CEO, Christopher Morrison says he's impressed with employees' response to his reform efforts.

"There's a very good group down there," Morrison said during a 45-minute phone interview with the Courier-Post, his first since the state Department of Human Services appointed him to overhaul the troubled institution in a rural section of the township. "They're working together tightly as a team. I've been very impressed by their hard work and dedication."

During inspections in the spring, federal inspectors found multiple re-

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JOHN ZIOMEK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Ancora Psychiatric Hospital CEO Christopher Morrison speaks during an open house at the Winslow facility last fall.

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peat deficiencies at the facility. Many were the same problems uncovered by inspectors nearly a decade ago, including improper food-handling practices and the failure to update a patient's treatment plan after the use of restraints.

As a result, the hospital lost its Medicare certification for 11 days, and its top three administrators were reassigned.

Ancora's former CEO, John Lubitsky, now works as a human resources manager for the state's Division of Developmental Disabilities.

Morrison spoke with the Courier-Post from state offices in Trenton and was accompanied by Ellen Lovejoy, a state public information officer, and Rosita M. Cornejo, director of quality assurance for the state Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Morrison answered questions about abuse allegations, employee accountability, restraint use and staffing.

"Chris was brought in there as a change agent, and he's effecting change," Lovejoy said. Since his arrival, she added, "there's been enhanced training, staff development — and overall supervision and standards have increased dramatically."

Additionally, Lovejoy said, the hospital has improved its food services operations, increased quality assurance monitoring, launched peer support and patient focus groups, provided a comfort room to calm patients, and developed a methodology to "identify vulnerabilities in patients who have been restrained."

But patient advocates have seen cycles of crisis, reform and a slide backward at all the state's psychiatric hospitals, said Joe Young, executive director of Disability Rights New Jersey, a nonprofit advocacy group.

"What we would be most interested in seeing is sustained improvement over the long haul," Young said.

Morrison is tasked with turning around a hospital long plagued by violence and failed inspections.

During the first nine months of 2015, for example, employees and patients needed medical attention after 77 assaults committed by patients, the most among the state's four psychiatric hospitals. Data for the last quarter won't be available until April, officials said.

Records show violent incidents are declining since Ancora began paying close attention to the problem. Several pilot projects are underway to cut down assaults and restraint use. One has already reduced restraint use by 44 percent in its first month since staff



Federal inspectors found violations at Ancora last year.

JOHN ZIOMEK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

were taught to respond differently to patients in order to minimize conflict, Morrison said.

Morrison also hopes to bring in peer support specialists through a partnership with Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey, a nonprofit mental health agency led by consumers.

While patient and employee safety is a priority, the hospital administrator said he doesn't know why Ancora had the highest number of assaults last year.

Figuring out what led to an assault can be difficult, despite the presence of security cameras and close monitoring by staff.

Two days before Christmas, one patient was taken to Virtua in the middle of the night for an elbow injury that required hospital treatment, Lovejoy confirmed.

Though no assault was alleged, the Department of Human Services Police launched an investigation, the spokeswoman said.

Two months later, Morrison still doesn't know how the patient was hurt. No charges have been filed.

Reporting abuse

Hospital workers are required by law to report suspected abuse by employees, Morrison said. But current and former employees have told the Courier-Post some are afraid to do so.

Employees and patients concerned about retaliation can report abuse allega-

tions anonymously to the division's Patient Services Compliance Unit, Disability Rights New Jersey, the Joint Commission, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services or through Ancora's internal hotline, Morrison said.

Information on how to report suspected abuse is listed in patient and family handbooks obtained by the Courier-Post through an Open Public Records Act request.

"I understand them wanting to remain anonymous," said Morrison, who acknowledged receiving unsigned letters alleging abuse by employees. "They have to give us as much information as possible so we can track down the time, date, location, and person involved, so that we can make sure we take proper action. ... We want a safer environment for everybody, and (the) first step is reporting it, so we can investigate it."

Such allegations rarely end in criminal charges. In cases of substantiated abuse, employees are more often disciplined or fired. Some win appeals through the Civil Service Commission.

"Even if that employee is suspended and taken off duty that day, there's still a long process they have to go through," Lovejoy said.

Two years ago, Morrison's predecessor fired an employee and pressed simple-assault charges against her for pushing a developmentally disabled patient into a chair. The incident was recorded on the hospital's security cameras, but a municipal court judge dismissed the

long-delayed case after the court misplaced the video evidence.

Today, the employee is listed as suspended from her \$38,000-a-year job as a human services assistant, while she appeals her dismissal before the Civil Service Commission. If she wins her appeal, she will return to work with back pay.

That was the case for another employee who appealed her dismissal and was instead given a 90-day suspension for insubordination and verbally abusing a patient several years ago, according to records obtained from the Civil Service Commission.

Both employees were named in a lawsuit filed by the parents of Tara Murphy of Toms River, who allege their developmentally disabled daughter was mistreated and permanently harmed during her stay at Ancora. A federal judge is weighing the state's motion to dismiss the case.

Asked if the process is intended to protect employees, Morrison said he didn't design the system.

"I think when we see something, we want to take action to preserve safety," Morrison said. "We go through the process that's provided to us."

Ancora's census averaged 437 patients last month. Of the hospital's nearly 1,700 employees, 20 are psychiatrists, 177 are registered nurses, and 56 are licensed practical nurses. About 95 employees work part-time without benefits.

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