The Virgin Islands Consortium

Another Firm Offering Behavioral Services To VI Patients Threatens To End Relationship With D.H.S. Because Of Nonpayment

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Less than two weeks after advanced behavioral health facility Devereux Florida was on the verge of sending back to the territory severely disabled patients because of nonpayment of more than a year, another firm housing Virgin Islands patients with mental illness -- Benchmark Behavioral Health Systems -- on Tuesday threatened to end its relationship with the Department of Human Services, because D.H.S. has not paid Benchmark for almost a year for services provided.

According to an email conversation between D.H.S. officials, including Commissioner Felecia Blyden, and Benchmark officials, D.H.S. was attempting to secure a new contract with the firm for services through September 2021. But Steve Terry, director of business development at Benchmark, said while Benchmark was "eager" to move forward with the new contract, it would nonetheless end its relationship with D.H.S. if payments owed were not furnished immediately.

"For the record, the old Benchmark contract with the Virgin Islands DHHS has been expired since October of 2017. Despite numerous attempts by Benchmark staff to work with DHSS officials in an effort to facilitate a new contract, limited progress has been made to this point," Mr. Terry wrote in the email, seen here. "Furthermore, we have had a client here in our facility since January 2018, which we have yet to receive payments for. In conclusion, we here at Benchmark have enjoyed providing youth from the Virgin Islands with quality psychiatric residential services since 2014. Unfortunately, if this contract/payment situation between the Virgin Islands and Benchmark is not resolved immediately, then Benchmark will have no other choice but to terminate this relationship. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help expedite an immediate resolution to this contract/payment process."

D.H.S. seems to move with haste after being threatened. After Devereux Florida purchased tickets to send back to the USVI patients receiving care at the facility, payment was sent overnight to the firm.

Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services chair, Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, said the continued lapses by D.H.S. needed to be resolved. "I am convinced that the governor is totally unaware of these persistent and vexing issues. I am calling on Property and Procurement and D.H.S. to sit down, roll up their sleeves and figure out a path forward to resolving the contract issues. I am tired of people passing the proverbial buck! People need to take responsibility. The families of these patients need to wake up and demand answers."

Saint Cyril The Great, LLC, an assisted living facility, was also owed funds from D.H.S, but they received payment after incessant requests, The Consortium has learned.

Yet even as D.H.S. continues to fail with its payment agreements with multiple companies, the department's bright spot has been its followup to assure that Virgin Islands patients being housed in off-island facilities receive the best care, according to Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly.

"When I met with Devereux representatives last week, I was pleased and proud to hear them say that the V.I. holds them accountable for the treatment of our residents, more so than other states," the veteran senator, who is not seeking reelection, said. "We check on the residents annually and the case workers are very caring. It was truly refreshing to hear this. Now, we just have to get the contract issues resolved."

D.H.S. problems relative to payments are manifold. Earlier this year, Behavioral Services of the Virgin Islands, owed $4.8 million by the Government of the Virgin Islands through D.H.S., decided to shut its operations in the territory.

In June, Ms. Blyden told The Consortium that the department would pay in full the amount owed to V.I.B.S. in one week. Ms. Blyden said D.H.S. had the funds to pay all along, but that a contract dispute had forced delays. And she said the agreement to pay, though it did not secure V.I.B.S.'s services in the long-term, would keep V.I.B.S.'s doors open beyond its closure date — the end of June — perhaps for a transitional period.

But D.H.S. knew of V.I.B.S.'s plan to shutter operations because of nonpayment for over a year. "Essentially, it took a court action for Human Services to expedite payment," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said in June. "There was no serious attempt by the leadership of the department to engage V.I.B.S. in a robust discussion about extending services."

The Consortium reached out to Ms. Blyden for comment, but no response was provided at time of writing. Following the article's publication, D.H.S. spokesperson Carol Burke called, requesting that questions relative to the Benchmark matter be provided in writing. The Consortium will do as requested and update this story with the information furnished.

Feature Image: Benchmark Behavioral Health Systems