

EDITORIAL: Time for change at CVH, Whiting

The Whiting Forensic Division maximum-security psychiatric hospital in Middletown, Conn., is seen on Friday, Sept. 15, 2017. Thirty-one staff members have been suspended and nine have been arrested in connection with the alleged abuse of a patient. A state lawmaker says more allegations of staff misconduct are emerging after the suspensions and arrests. (AP Photo/Dave Collins)

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Two years after a scandal over the abuse of a patient at Whiting Forensic Institute, a disability rights group has published a report on what it calls “pervasive” problems with the treatment of patients at both Whiting and Connecticut Valley Hospital. The stated object of the report was “not to rehash the abuse scandals but to investigate what happened in the wake of the abuse.” This approach stands a good chance of revealing what changes have been made since the 2017 abuse scandal and, it is to be hoped, what more needs to be done.

The events revealed two years ago at Whiting — which accommodates patients involved in the criminal justice system, some of them on a maximum-security basis, on the grounds of CVH in Middletown — were both shocking and intolerable. The Associated Press has reported that 10 staff members were arrested and 35 others were fired related to the abuse of a 62-year-old patient. The abuse led to the creation of a separate task force that is considering deeper reforms, including shutting down the state-run facility.

A shut-down would be a drastic response to the problem, but the state seems to be responding positively to the findings of the independent Disability Rights Connecticut, the successor to the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities. We trust that the state will take serious action, even in this time of fiscal uncertainty.

Other problems detailed in the report include patients being denied visitors; inadequate investigations of deaths; and inadequate reporting of abuse and neglect. It may come as a surprise — maybe even a shock — to many state residents to learn that Connecticut Valley Hospital is exempt from licensing by the state Department of Health, meaning that the hospital is not necessarily held to the same standards as other psychiatric hospitals in Connecticut.

That should certainly change, and probably much more as well. So far, it appears that the state is taking this situation with the seriousness it deserves. If so, it will assure patients and their families that it is living up to the CVH mission statement: “To promote recovery through collaborative, compassionate, and culturally competent treatment in a safe and caring environment.”

High goals, for sure. But attainable? That remains to be seen.

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