

D.C. psych hospital committed patients to boost profits, lawsuit says

A former patient alleges D.C.'s only psychiatric hospital systematically commits patients when not medically necessary to maximize insurance payments.

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By [Jenna Portnoy](#)

The District's only psychiatric hospital prioritizes profits over patient care, systematically committing patients when not medically necessary to maximize insurance payments, a former patient alleges in a lawsuit.

The unidentified patient was held for four days at the Psychiatric Institute of Washington in unsanitary conditions while doctors allegedly falsified her mental health records and refused her access to a telephone, according to [a civil lawsuit filed this month](#) in federal court in D.C.

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(The Washington Post)

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The lawsuit seeks unspecified damages for the plaintiff and certification of a class of thousands of patients involuntarily hospitalized at the Tenleytown facility in the decade since it was acquired by corporate hospital giant Universal Health Services.

“Behind this is a massive corporate enterprise that is continuing to expand rapidly and has made no bones about the fact that they are interested in nothing more than expansion and increasing occupancy in these facilities,” the plaintiff’s attorney, Drew LaFramboise of Greenbelt, Maryland, said in an interview Thursday.

Hospital chief executive Eric Amoh and spokespeople for Universal Health Services did not respond to requests for comment.

Disability rights watchdogs have investigated the psychiatric hospital for incidents of abuse and neglect that have left patients traumatized and prompted city agencies that have multimillion dollar contracts with the hospital to step up their oversight.

In almost five months, the city's Department of Behavioral Health has reviewed 600 cases, nearly every involuntary admission to the hospital, which is many more cases than the administration previously reviewed, said Wayne Turnage, deputy mayor for health and human services. The city plans to issue updated hospital regulations this summer expanding the District's authority, he said.

"Washingtonians deserve the highest quality of care in our hospitals. When we became aware of recent reports, the District significantly strengthened our work to ensure patient well-being and contract compliance," Turnage said. "Any evidence of wrongdoing will be followed by action."

The 130-bed psychiatric hospital is the go-to facility for adults and adolescents who are involuntarily committed, after a visit to an emergency room and evaluation from a doctor.

The lawsuit gives the following account of the plaintiff's ordeal:

On April 13, the plaintiff had an argument with her soon-to-be ex-husband and walked around Union Station near her home to calm down. Her husband, meanwhile, called the police to report that she was suicidal and falsely claimed she had a specific psychiatric diagnosis, according to the lawsuit.

Police surrounded her, the lawsuit states, then placed her in handcuffs and took her to the city's 24-hour behavioral health crisis center at 2 p.m., where a physician spoke with her for less than five minutes. By 9 p.m., a different doctor whom she never met decided to transfer her to the psychiatric hospital for a seven-day involuntary commitment, leaving her "stunned and terrified," court documents say.

She was sent via ambulance, while restrained, to the hospital the next morning, where the lawsuit states a resident psychiatrist described her as a calm and cooperative mother with good judgment and awareness who was eager to be there for her 6- and 9-year-old children.

Yet the hospital falsified a "safety risk assessment" of the plaintiff to commit her and ensure the hospital could recover "a maximum amount of revenue from her health insurance carrier," the lawsuit says. The patient's attorney declined to say if she had private or public-payer insurance.

The lawsuit says the patient received no treatment and had no meaningful interaction with staff members that day or the next day. "Indeed, she was entirely ignored," the lawsuit says.

She asked to call an attorney but was told her unit did not have a working telephone. The following day, the lawsuit states, a doctor whom she met with for a few minutes wrote a progress note that falsely claimed she was disheveled, paranoid and had suicidal ideation, continuing her commitment.

On April 17, the fourth day of her confinement, “through her own ingenuity and effort,” the lawsuit said, the patient used a hospital worker’s phone to make an unsanctioned call to contact a public defender and secure a judge’s order to end her commitment. After that, a doctor reported her suicidal ideation “suddenly disappeared” but falsified the time to make it appear the decision was made independently of the judge’s order to do so, the lawsuit says.

A discharge summary said the patient was offered therapy, daily treatment meetings, exercise and healthy food as well as outdoor access, but the lawsuit said none of that happened. The facility was unsanitary, lacked hot water and was uncomfortably cold, the filing says. It adds it was also understaffed, often with one technician and nurse for more than 20 patients.

The lawsuit alleges the hospital and corporate parent violated the Americans With Disabilities Act, the D.C. Human Rights Act, and the patient’s constitutional rights to privacy and due process, among other laws, and intentionally inflicted emotional distress.

“This has certainly been a traumatic experience for her, a life-altering experience for her,” said LaFramboise, the plaintiff’s attorney. “She’s not a person who had a history of mental illness. This is an event that really struck her to her core. She is still dealing with fallout and injuries she suffered from this event and probably will be into the foreseeable future.”

Universal Health Services has come under fire in recent years for similar allegations.

In 2020, the company and one of its facilities in Georgia agreed to pay \$122 million to settle claims that the company billed for medically unnecessary inpatient behavioral health services, billed for services that weren’t delivered and paid kickbacks to federal health-care beneficiaries, according to the federal Justice Department.

More recently, a Richmond jury in September delivered a \$360 million verdict against the company over allegations that the medical director of Cumberland Children’s Hospital sexually assaulted patients. A December lawsuit alleges that more than 100 minors were sexually abused at other company facilities in Illinois.

Universal Health Services also owns George Washington University Hospital in Foggy Bottom and will operate the city’s new \$434 million hospital, Cedar Hill Regional Medical Center GW Health, in Congress Heights, which is set to open April 15.

Based in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, Universal Health Services is the largest operator of private for-profit hospitals in the country, with more than 400 facilities in the United States and United Kingdom.