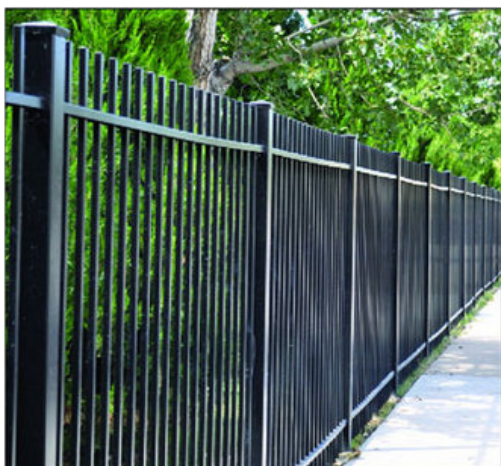


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City, police grapple with problems at Benchmark

by Rolf Koecher and Melinda Williams

07.09.10 - 01:01 pm



Friday: City grapples with Benchmark

WOODS CROSS —Woods Cross officials are worried that Benchmark Regional Hospital is struggling with ongoing violence, escapes and even a riot by patients, including sex offenders and troubled teens. But getting detailed information from the hospital itself is proving problematic.

And that's frustrating city officials who say hospital administrators are stonewalling the release of information to the city.

"We don't know what they are going to do," Woods Cross City Administrator Gary Uresk said. We're just looking at all our options. The city feels that it needs to take a pro-active stance. I think there are other issues there that need to be looked into," he recently told the Clipper. He said he and council members are also concerned that the hospital is hiding behind federal privacy laws to keep city officials from finding out.



Saturday: Legacy water issues getting resolved

Benchmark CEO Barry Woodward said, however, the hospital's patients, like patients in any type of health care setting, have the right to privacy under the federal Health Information Privacy Act (HIPA) laws.

Police have found things quieter at the facility recently, but the number of runaways from the psychiatric hospital has risen.

City officials are concerned not only with the number of escapes, but with what they see as a dangerous situation.

In March 2009, police from several agencies were called to the hospital, where they said about 60 of the



hospital's patients were rioting.

The incident sparked concern for the safety of police officers and residents.

Uresk said back in the 1980s, the city thought they were approving a local psychiatric facility designed to help Davis County residents cope with depression, addiction and the like.

Instead, the hospital has been filled with extremely troubled, sometimes dangerous, 12-18-year-old youth. The hospital stays are paid for by state governments that often don't know what to do with these troubled teens.

"That was not what we approved. It was clearly touted as a local community hospital," Uresk said.

Woods Cross Police Chief Paul Howard said since that 2009 incident, they've been called out mainly on runaways. "The problem is they (the Benchmark staff) don't always notify us of a runaway for an extended period of time. (The patients) are out in the community, but we don't know they're out there."

Howard worries something could happen to residents of the city or employees of nearby businesses.

The young men who try to escape from Benchmark are generally trying to make it back home, Howard said. Several years ago, one made it out of state. Another, just this past year, made it into Salt Lake City, although most never make it out of south Davis County.

Howard said the police need to be notified, not only as a safety issue for the community and patient, but also, "the more eyes and ears out there looking for an individual, the better." Howard said the CEO has been open to discussions when an individual has run away.

Benchmark's Woodward said those issues will have to be addressed with city officials. "We've done our best to work with the city," he said, adding, "We want to be a good member of the community."

The facility wasn't widely known prior to 2009 because it had been operating quietly. Police and city officials, however, noticed the deteriorating conditions over the years and weren't surprised by the events of 2009.

"We are deeply concerned about there being a threat to the community," Uresk said. "Over the years, it seems to have escalated."

Following Clipper reports of the March 2009 incident, people supportive of Benchmark wrote to the Clipper, saying the incident was clearly not a riot and accusing police and city officials of grossly exaggerating the problem,

Uresk, however, sticks to his guns, especially with the idea there had been a riot. "Last year, it was very serious," he said. "Teens were barricaded into their rooms

and they were a threat. The riot and other incidents are not isolated incidents.”

Uresk said that some time after the March incident, a couple of the patients got out and police had to wrestle them down at Kmart.

He, and Howard, struggle with the idea that Kmart employees called the police about the suspicious teens, but no call was ever received from Benchmark alerting police that two had escaped. A third incident involved a teen running away during a sports activity outside the facility. That area has since been enclosed with a tall iron fence.

“The council is fully aware and concerned,” he said. “Our concern is that we’ve just been lucky.”

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