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Democrats Warned of Staffing Shortages at Winnebago One Year Ago

Budget motion aimed to improve staff retention, safety at Winnebago Mental Health

“At some point, something bad is going to happen.” – Rep. Hintz (May 16, 2017)

MADISON – One year ago, Democrats on the Joint Committee on Finance introduced a budget motion that would have required the Department of Health Services to work with the Department of Administration to develop a pay progression plan at the Department’s care and treatment facilities that experience high vacancy rates like Winnebago Mental Health Institute (WMHI). The motion was intended to improve staff retention and maintain safety. On October 15th, 2018, a patient fell and hit his head at WMHI. He was left on the floor for 14 hours before being taken to the hospital where he died two weeks later. Investigations cited staffing shortages as a significant issue at WMHI.

“My Democratic colleagues and I introduced a proposal last year during budget deliberations that would have increased staff pay at facilities like Winnebago. Since I took office in 2007, staffing has been an issue. Employees are burning out, overtime is mandatory, and the pay isn’t competitive enough to retain good people given the workload. Safety of both patients and staff was at risk due to the inherent risks involved with staff shortages.”

In a follow-up investigation by the federal government inspectors found WMHI’s staffing shortages so severe that the facility could not "ensure a safe environment for the patients." Staff interviews by Oshkosh Police found that the patient, who later passed away, urinated on himself while on the floor, but was not cleaned up due to staffing shortages.

“Wisconsin faces serious challenges due to a labor shortage that is only expected to get worse in the coming years. But if state government is going to provide adequate care for the mentally ill, or security for those incarcerated for violating our laws, they have to address the reality facing the institutions tasked with this responsibility. The situation at Winnebago was a ticking time bomb that unfortunately is not a surprise to workers who have been sounding the alarms about the unsustainable staffing shortage for years.”

“The motion we made on the Joint Finance Committee last year was an attempt to put a plan forward that recognizes the competitive labor market of 2018, and aims to increase the chances of filling these important jobs with family supporting careers. Reasonable work schedules and a safer workplace are essential to increasing retention. The attrition at Winnebago and in many of our prisons and state facilities is directly tied to decisions made Governor Walker. Act 10 led to the immediate exodus of many of the most experienced state employees accelerating the labor shortage challenge and playing a role in the previously uncovered issues at Lincoln Hills and King Veterans Home.” Rep. Hintz concluded.

You can see Rep. Hintz’s full comments on the budget motion [HERE](#).

View the budget motion [HERE](#).