

Troubled nursing home gets new ownership

HIGHLIGHTS

South Pasadena facility had been the subject of numerous investigations

Former owner Shlomo Rechnitz is state's largest owner

New owner pledges more traditional skilled nursing population



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SOUTH PASADENA — California's largest nursing home owner, who has staunchly defended the practices at one of his most troubled facilities, was publicly called out Wednesday in South Pasadena, where local officials gathered to announce that new operators were taking over the home.

Orange police cones marked the entrance Wednesday of Mission Grove Healthcare & Wellness Centre, where the mayor, police chief, city manager and others cheered as the new Los Angeles-based operators were introduced to community residents and the media.

The facility, formerly known as South Pasadena Convalescent Hospital, was decertified by the federal government in January for alleged poor quality care following the deaths of several patients. The move stripped the facility of its crucial Medicare and Medi-Cal funding, a measure rarely taken by public health officials.

Because of the regulatory problems, the 156-bed home is down to 17 residents, according to one of its new operators, Elliot Zemel of Los Angeles, who said his grandfather originally built and operated the home decades earlier. He said the new operators have applied for recertification, noting that past problems at the home are "an embarrassment for anyone who's in the industry."

Shlomo Rechnitz, a Los Angeles entrepreneur, bought the South Pasadena facility from Zemel's extended family in 2006. Earlier this year, Rechnitz owned about 80 homes in California, operating about 1 in every 14 skilled nursing beds.

In the past year, his facilities have become the focus of state and federal scrutiny and a flurry of citations and fines for alleged poor quality care. The South Pasadena home was one of three Rechnitz homes to be decertified by the government between October and January.

Sallie Hofmeister, a spokeswoman for Rechnitz, defended the care the facility has provided, noting it was one of few that offered care to mentally ill patients in need of skilled nursing.

“Since 2007, (the home) has provided quality health care services to a severely underserved population of patients with few to no options for placement,” she wrote in an email. “Despite the challenges of care for these patients with secondary psychiatric diagnoses, (the facility) consistently excelled in survey after survey by the Department of Public Health between 2007 and 2014.”

Many of the South Pasadena residents and officials attending Wednesday’s news conference described their frustration over a changing patient population during Rechnitz’s nine-year tenure.

“What happened here in South Pasadena, quite frankly, is unreal, “ said Police Chief Art Miller, who contends his small department has been burdened by excessive calls for service in and around the home.

Miller said the facility began housing more young, ambulatory patients, mixing them in with traditional frail, elderly patients. He said the mix came to include “convicted felons, probationers, drug users, rapists, robbers.”

Miller cited the case of 57-year-old Courtney Cargill, a mentally ill resident who committed suicide last year by lighting herself on fire after leaving the facility unsupervised. Cargill’s family has sued Rechnitz and several companies over her death.

“I tried to get help for her over a long period of time,” said sister Casey Cargill, describing Courtney’s activities at the South Pasadena facility as largely consisting of smoking on the patio.

Miller said he has pressed state officials to file homicide charges in connection with Cargill’s death. David Jett, a special agent with the state attorney general’s office, confirmed Wednesday that a criminal probe is underway but declined to elaborate.

Zemel said the new operators plan to revert to a more traditional model of serving the elderly. The new group operates four skilled nursing facilities in the Los Angeles area, and intends to stay small and connected with the surrounding communities, Zemel said.



Video: Controversy shadows South Pasadena nursing home

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