

State cracks down on patient abuse, neglect

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To reduce problems that have plagued North Carolina's psychiatric hospitals, state officials have instituted a zero-tolerance policy toward employees found to have abused or neglected patients.

"We're going to really take a hard line that, if we understand there's abuse or neglect of a patient, then we're going to remove the employee or employees," Secretary of Health and Human Services Lanier Cansler said.

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The crack down was one of Cansler's first moves after Gov. Beverly Perdue put him in charge of the troubled mental health system last month.

"If we find the abuse and neglect did not occur, then we can reinstate (an employee), but we're not going to allow people in our hospitals to mistreat patients," he said.

Since he put the policy in place almost three weeks ago, two employees at Central Regional Hospital and three temporary employees at Cherry Hospital have been fired. More than a half-dozen other employees are on paid leave pending investigations into abuse or neglect allegations.

DHHS has also followed up with law enforcement agencies to pursue criminal charges when appropriate, a procedure Perdue said she supports.

"I will personally see that the person is punished," she said of any employee found to have abused or neglected a patient. "It's just not going to happen anymore on my watch."

Advocates for the disabled say Perdue's administration has sent a much stronger message than that of former Gov. Mike Easley, a change they say was desperately needed.

"An early grade would be an A," Vicki Smith, executive director of Disability Rights North Carolina, said of Cansler. "He's sending a clear message that he means it."

Smith was a vocal critic of past policies, but she met with Cansler last week and said she is encouraged by what she sees.

"(Psychiatric hospital employees) have to realize there's a consequence (to abuse or neglect), and we're really talking about a cultural change," she said.

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