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What is Going on at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Healthcare Services?

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SUMMARY: *Rehoboth McKinley Christian Healthcare Services (RMCHCS) is centered around a 60-bed, acute care hospital in Gallup, New Mexico. Many RMCHCS patients come from the nearby Navajo and Zuni reservations. The region has been one of the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. After taking over management of the hospital in 2020, the Community Hospital Corporation (CHC) of Plano, Texas, laid off 80 health care workers ([Associated Press, 7/8/21](#)). Multiple providers have resigned in protest over dangerous patient-care conditions that resulted from the layoffs and other CHC cost-cutting measures; others have been fired or forced to resign for speaking up about those problems. In an effort to keep working in their community, the remaining hospital physicians filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to unionize with the Union of American Physicians and Dentists in August of 2021 ([Gallup Sun, 8/27/21, p. 1](#)). Community Hospital Corporation is fighting their unionization effort, forcing the physicians to spend work time attending captive audience meetings led by a \$425/hour anti-union consultant ([Gallup Sun, 8/27/21, p. 22](#)). They are also lobbying to have FEMA doctors and nurses replace the local staff they have driven away.*

To put RMCHCS back on course, physicians and other hospital workers are asking for:

1. Community Hospital Corporation to respect the right of employees to make their own decisions about unionization without retaliation or harassment;
2. The selection of a permanent CEO who lives in and understands the local community;
3. An end to contracts with management corporations based in other states; and
4. Funding that allows RMCHCS to provide the level of health care all people deserve.

DETAILS: Health care providers at RMCHCS were hailed as heroes by the national media as they faced down one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the world ([Rolling Stone, 6/18/20](#)). But once the cameras went away, those same providers came under attack from a group of out-of-state hospital administrators that were brought in by the RMCHCS Board after they terminated the overpaid hospital CEO David Conejo in June of 2020 ([Associated Press, 9/15/20](#)).

In its first year running RMCHCS, the Plano, Texas-based Community Hospital Corporation (CHC) laid off 80 healthcare workers as a cost-saving measure ([Associated Press, 7/8/21](#)), leaving the hospital unprepared for the current wave of COVID-19 infections. They also fired Dr. Caleb Lauber, Chief of the Medical Staff and the only Navajo-speaking doctor in the system, without notice or explanation. He and his colleagues believe his termination, as well as disciplinary actions taken against other physicians at the time, were intended to dissuade doctors from objecting to the unsafe patient conditions that have resulted from CHC's management-from-a-distance ([the Interim CEO that CHC assigned to RMCHCS, Don Smithburg, lives in Kansas City](#)) and extreme cost cutting measures.

In one instance of overzealous budgeting, the hospital went for several months without a working call-light system, a legally-mandated tool that lets providers know when a patient needs help. Instead of call-lights, patients were given wooden-handled bells to ring if they wanted to summon a nurse or doctor. In addition to being illegal, the bells were of no use if the patient was coding or otherwise in extreme distress. After being told by CHC management that they would have to wait until the end of 2021 for a new call light system, the doctors pooled their money to purchase a temporary call-light system, but were prevented from installing it in the hospital themselves.

In another example, the CHC-created staffing shortage caused administrators to close down the hospital operating room completely on weekends, even to emergencies. That meant doctors working in labor and delivery had to be prepared to perform emergency C-sections with the patient under local anesthetic only, something that does not meet the standard of care.

RMCHCS providers continue to resign rather than work under the unsafe conditions and culture of fear that are taking root under Community Hospital Corporation's leadership. Both the RN training program and the newly created residency program for doctors are in jeopardy as key staff members resign. Having driven away nearly 100 local health care workers in their first year through layoffs, resignations, and terminations, CHC is now lobbying the government to send FEMA emergency workers to take their place. Physicians and other health care workers would rather see a permanent solution, which means installing a local management team that works to restaff the hospital with people who are rooted in the area.