

Haley VA Forum Clarified Concerns Over Mental Health Care

If anything, Friday's forum at the Haley VA helped to clear the air about a complaint that unlicensed doctors at the hospital were not properly supervised when providing mental health care to veterans.

In attendance at the forum was Congressman Bilirakis, his colleague Congresswoman Ginny Brown-Waite, Haley VA administrators and Haley licensed psychologist Brian Nussbaum, who filed a complaint earlier this year that veterans were being treated for mental health care at Haley by unlicensed psychologists with little-to-no supervision.

(see "Bilirakis Joins Brown-Waite in looking into VA Complaint")

Below is a little of the back and forth between Nussbaum and Haley officials during the forum.

From the Tampa Trib . . .

Sitting in the audience, Nussbaum was the only one allowed to ask pointed questions of the panel. He said again, as he did in his complaint to the Florida Board of Psychology, that he is concerned there are at least eight unlicensed psychologists treating veterans at Haley. That's out of a staff of 42.

"I'm concerned over the large number of unlicensed staff psychologists being hired," Nussbaum said. "It seemed unlikely that qualified, licensed professionals were unavailable."

He alluded to a secretive atmosphere at Haley. Facing the panel of administrators, he said, "I'm sitting here alone, and that's concerning. Why is that? There are people who have expressed their support. They're afraid they're going to lose their job."

Hiring unlicensed psychologists is legal, but Nussbaum has alleged Haley is skirting the state's requirements by not sufficiently supervising them as they treat patients.

Nussbaum's charge is one that Haley officials flatly deny.

From the St. Pete Times . . .

Haley officials say Nussbaum is mistaken in a complaint he filed with the state Board of Psychology a month ago saying up to 12 unlicensed psychologists at Haley receive little, if any, supervision.

For one, they say just eight of 36 psychologists are unlicensed right now -- the number shifts almost weekly as people leave or get hired.

"Our supervision not only meets state and federal regulations, it exceeds them," said Dr. Edward Cutolo, Haley's chief of staff.

The VA examined two months of patient notes by unlicensed psychologists before the forum and found just 2.5 percent didn't have mandatory signatures from supervisors showing they had been reviewed.

"We're not apologetic about the process," Cutolo said. "It's an excellent process."

In an effort to clarify policy and assure the quality of mental care for veterans, VA officials guarantee a "forthcoming directive" of current policies and practices when unlicensed psychologists treat veterans. Haley is reported to be already implementing this policy, which Nussbaum views as a positive outcome of this issue being raised.

The St. Pete Times quoted him as saying . . .

"I see it as a victory that they're trying to address the issue," Nussbaum said after the forum.

As a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and one who is very much engaged with Haley VA officials, Congressman Bilirakis continues to follow this issue very closely and supports every effort to improve mental health care services for our nation's veterans.

Check out his work on behalf of veterans and our military men and women here.