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Health Care Policy

Call Centers Serving Addicts Under Capitol Hill Scrutiny

Call centers that connect individuals to drug treatment facilities are under congressional scrutiny over their practices.

Bipartisan leaders of the House Energy and Commerce Committee announced a new front in their inquiry into how patients are connected to treatment facilities, in particular the practice of patient brokering, where individuals serve as intermediaries to connect patients with treatment facilities. The committee, which announced May 30 a round of letters to call centers, cited media reports about the financial incentives that brokers can receive by directing patients to specific facilities.

A committee aide told Bloomberg Law May 30 that the committee hopes the responses from these call centers, or aggregators, will provide a better understanding of their business practices.

"The business of advertising and recruiting for substance use disorder treatment requires greater scrutiny, and those battling addiction deserve a safe and dependable environment when seeking treatment," a press release from the committee said.

The House panel sent letters to executives at Texas-based Addiction No More, Florida-based Addiction Recovery Now, Tennessee-based American Addiction Centers, Michigan-based Elite Rehab Placement, California-based Intervention Allies, Florida-based Redwood Recovery Solutions, Florida-based Solutions Recovery Center and Georgia-based Treatment Management Co.

The letters asked the call centers about their practices related to treatment facilities, assistance in obtaining or signing up for health insurance, operation of websites, overall call statistics, certification or training for their employees and any criminal matters related to them or affiliated treatment centers.

A committee aide also told Bloomberg Law that these letters were sent to a cross-section of small and large call centers that were identified through media reports and independent research.

'About Time' Michael Cartwright, CEO and chairman of American Addiction Centers, told Bloomberg Law May 30, "It's about time that Congress gets into looking into this issue."

Cartwright, who runs the largest addiction treatment center in the U.S., said he has seen states like Florida, Tennessee, and California pass legislation recently to

clean up the industry, but he wants to see more agencies being asked these questions and potentially legislation on a federal level.

Carmine Thompson, founder of North Hollywood-based Intervention Allies, told Bloomberg Law May 30 that the practice of patient brokering is "despicable" and that, to his knowledge, none of the facilities he works with have participated in this practice.

Thompson does this work because he lost his brother to an overdose, so he said he feels a responsibility to the families of the people he tries to help. "The last thing I want to do is bring someone to a program that is not doing what they say they want to do," Thompson said.

Thompson believes he was sent a letter because he runs 60 websites to generate calls and traffic and links to programs on his websites for optimization. Thompson is not affiliated with the facilities he links on his website and said he does so because he believes in their programs.

The difference between Thompson and the call centers and patient brokering schemes described in this letter is that he answers every call personally. Thompson also does not get involved with an individual's insurance.

The Energy and Commerce Committee previously sent a letter to the Department of Health and Human Services in July 2017 inquiring about the department's efforts to identify and reduce these practices. The committee also sent letters to agencies in six states asking for information about drug treatment facilities in those states, oversight of those facilities, and laws and regulations related to this practice and drug treatment programs.

Most recently, the House panel's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing about fraud and abuse in the drug treatment industry in December 2017.

Local Action Palm Beach County, Fla., which has a high density of treatment centers, is invested in stopping patient brokering. The Palm Beach Sober Home Task Force, which is run by Florida State Attorney Dave Aronberg, has arrested over 40 people connected with treatment centers and patient brokering in the county.

Most recently, the task force arrested Peter Katz, a doctor, for the sale of a schedule V substance, which contains limited quantities of certain narcotics, and unlawful possession of certain drugs without a valid prescription. Katz pleaded guilty to both charges and received probation, according to Aronberg's office.

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