

INTERVIEWER: Allegations of harassment, retaliation, and bullying of some workers at the Minnesota Veterans Home in Hastings may be investigated by state lawmakers as they look at millions in funding to replace the facility. That development comes after the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reports that current and former staffers of the Minnesota Veterans Home in Hastings say a toxic workplace culture has decimated staffing levels and made the facility not safe.

Pioneer Press Capitol Bureau reporter Christopher Magan has been looking into the allegations of harassment, and retaliation at the state-run home. He broke the story over the weekend. He joins us right now to talk about it

Christopher, welcome.

CHRISTOPHER Hi. Thank you for having me.

MAGAN:

INTERVIEWER: The Hastings Veterans Home doesn't often make news. So let's give folks a little background here. The Veterans Home sounds like a place that houses elderly veterans. Is that what it is?

CHRISTOPHER For the most part. I think that what the administrator said when he was testifying yesterday to a house

MAGAN: committee on the funding for replacement of the facility was that the age range was anywhere from, I think, 40 to 99. So it is a pretty broad range of people that live there.

Essentially what happens there is a lot of the folks that are residing there now are some of the most vulnerable veterans that the state has. These are people that have sort of serious medical issues or mental health concerns or struggle with substance abuse.

INTERVIEWER: So what are the caregivers saying about what's going on there, what's going wrong?

CHRISTOPHER So I talked to about a dozen different caregivers, mostly nurses, some counselors who work out there, and some

MAGAN: who continue to work there. And they basically say that there's this a toxic workplace culture that's been in place there for a number of years.

They've raised concerns about medical decisions by medical professionals being either undermined or overlooked by people who are not qualified medically to make decisions like that. There's been a couple of people who've said they've had to change personnel evaluations, and then other just basic issues of harassment and bullying for people that raise safety concerns. And they're not addressed.

So essentially, when they say this veteran is living in an unsafe condition, those issues are just either not addressed, or the people that raise them sort of face retribution for doing so.

INTERVIEWER: Don't those people have to report to the state about these issues?

CHRISTOPHER Yeah, so that's part of the issue of why they came to me, because they have raised their concerns with

MAGAN: leadership at the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs several times, going back almost a year now. They wrote to the commissioner, Larry Herke, about what was happening. And they sent a big packet of information to him that had about 14 or 15 different kind of narratives of what workers experience there as well as some other sort of examples of the culture and things that were going on.

And they felt like their pleas for help were sort of ignored. And in the summer, they reached out to the governor's office and sent him the same information. And then about a month after that, they got a letter from the Department of Management and Budget, which oversees most human resources complaints for the state. And that basically said that they looked into the complaint and that there had been some, basically, things that they were going to change and that the complaint was basically closed.

So the folks that I talked to said that no one from the state has reached out to interview them or to learn more about their allegations. So they sort of feel like this has just not been addressed properly in the way that it should be.

INTERVIEWER: And to be clear, this has been going on, allegedly, for a while.

CHRISTOPHER Yeah, that's what I'm told. Some of the people that I have talked with worked there a number of years ago and
MAGAN: left. And like I said, some of them remain there now. They say this has been going on for a number of years.

It predates the pandemic. And I want to be clear that, obviously, the pandemic did have an impact on medical staff throughout the state. But the one thing that I think is important to remember here is that these workers have been saying that these issues that are leading to driving people away from working at the facility itself have been going on since prior to the coronavirus pandemic.

INTERVIEWER: How has it affected staffing levels?

CHRISTOPHER I'm told that staffing levels are at a bare minimum now. One of the things that some of the residents that I spoke
MAGAN: with said was that they are-- and also some of the workers that are currently there-- that they actually-- they float certain types of personnel between the Hastings facility and one in Minneapolis.

There's also a similar type of facility at the Minneapolis Veterans Home. And one thing that we should also be clear about is that this facility isn't a nursing home. It's not a skilled nursing facility. This is more of a care home. So many of these veterans are expected to be able to maintain their day to day lives. But they are there with access to 24-hour types of care from medical personnel as wellness counselors and things like that. But it's not a nursing home facility like you would imagine for people that have really extreme medical needs.

Staffing has gotten to a point where I guess they sometimes say they have to wait a number of days just to see an actual doctor if it's not an emergency, thing like things like that. It sounds like there's been quite a reduction in the staff levels.

INTERVIEWER: Because these workers say they've not been listened to, has anyone filed suit?

CHRISTOPHER So that's part of the reason why our story that ran on Sunday and the follow-up that was in today's paper only
MAGAN: named a few of them because there are several people out there who talked to me who asked to remain anonymous, either because they still work there or because they are pursuing a variety of different types of claims pursuant to what happened to them.

So there's I think a couple of workers' compensation claims that are underway as well as Equal Employment Opportunity Commission claims, I believe, that some are pursuing. And I've been told by attorneys who represent a number of workers that there is some talk of other legal action too.

INTERVIEWER: So there's a proposal to build a new veterans home in Hastings. And I'm curious, how might these allegations affect that bonding proposal?

CHRISTOPHER So that was the proposal that was before the House Veterans Committee yesterday afternoon. And the Hastings site administrator and a deputy commissioner for Veterans' Health care testified in favor of that yesterday.

They're asking for about \$78 million. That's the state's portion of the-- I think it's now up to \$220 million replacement for the Hastings campus. And the primary sponsor of that bill told me that he felt like the issues should be looked at separately. He definitely said that he was interested in investigating what was going on and these allegations. But he seemed to think that it was two separate issues.

The Hastings facility was built around 1900. It's got a lot of structural issues. There's asbestos that needs to be taken out of it. There's also problems with leaky roofs and ceilings that have collapsed and other types of issues.

And it's also just not designed for what current patients expect or residents expect right now. I mean, I think there's a lot of shared bathrooms and things like that that is sort of not the standard of modern care.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm. With about 30 seconds left here, Christopher, is the bottom line here, will the legislature investigate this, or is there another level to this? Will the feds get into this or not?

CHRISTOPHER So I'm not really sure about the feds looking into this as of right now. But I do-- we have been told, both by the House and the Senate Veterans Committees, that they're looking into this. The Senate Veterans Committee has already-- I talked to some people who've worked out there. And I was told yesterday by the committee chair of the House Vets Committee that they were also planning to look into it and talked to the commissioner. So I believe that either one or both of the committees may request that Commissioner Herke come and talk about it.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Christopher, thank you so much, good reporting.

CHRISTOPHER Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

MAGAN:

INTERVIEWER: *St. Paul Pioneer Press* Capitol Bureau reporter Christopher Magan.