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**CATHY WURZER:** Our lead story, two top leaders at the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs are out. Their firings over the weekend came weeks after allegations that a toxic workplace culture at the Hastings state Veterans Home decimated staffing levels and made the facility unsafe. Doug Hughes, a deputy commissioner for veterans health care for the state, and Mike Anderson, the administrator for the Hastings Veterans Home, were fired just before lawmakers meet tomorrow to look into the allegations.

Christopher Magan is the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* reporter who broke the story. He's been following the developments. He's on the line. Chris, welcome back.

**CHRISTOPHER MAGAN:** Thanks for having me.

**CATHY WURZER:** OK. Remind folks, exactly what conditions were alleged by workers? What'd the employees tell you?

**CHRISTOPHER MAGAN:** Yeah, so I've talked to more than a dozen current and former workers in Hastings, caregivers mostly. And they allege just a toxic workplace. They say if they raised concerns about safety issues that those issues are ignored or that they're sort of bullied into not continuing to push the issue. There's also been allegations that unqualified people interfere with medical decision-making.

So if a caregiver decides that a resident needs a certain type of care, sometimes an unqualified worker would overrule that in some ways. And I've also heard from several former workers that they were asked to change performance evaluations. So there's been quite an ongoing culture, these folks say, of just harassment and bullying and retaliation when they continue to push issues about safety or the level of care that's being provided.

**CATHY WURZER:** Is the care-- is the care of veterans being compromised?

**CHRISTOPHER MAGAN:** Well, I mean, the Department of Veterans Affairs says it's not, but a couple of veterans that I've spoke to have raised some serious questions about care, saying that staffing levels are significantly lower than they were and that they often have to wait quite some time for doctor visits and things like that unless it's an absolute emergency.

So I know that the folks that I'm talking to that are living there and working there are saying that the care has definitely been impacted by this toxic work environment. And I think it's also important to just to point out that obviously the pandemic had a really bad impact on health care workers. But I'm told that these issues predate the pandemic and have been going on for a number of years now.

**CATHY WURZER:** So Larry Herke, the commissioner of the State Department of Veterans Affairs, fires the two men that were at the center of the allegations, right? But they don't appear to be going quietly. What did they tell you?

**CHRISTOPHER MAGAN:** So yeah. So I learned on Saturday that there was going to be a staffing shakeup. And then Sunday, I was told by the Department of Veterans Affairs that they had dismissed the administrator of the Hastings Home and as well as his boss, who was in charge of veterans health care.

I spoke with Doug Hughes, who was in charge of the veterans health care last night, for quite a while. And he was pretty adamant that any allegations that had been brought forward from caregivers were properly addressed under the tenure of Mike Anderson, who was the administrator up until Saturday.

He also said that he believes that the employees were essentially upset because Anderson brought in some changes, including requiring caregivers to work on weekends that hadn't had to do that before and a number of other management changes that he says is why some employees are upset.

He also questioned why Commissioner Herke has not been to the facility to look into these allegations himself. I know that the commissioner will be there tomorrow afternoon for a listening session with employees. But as of right now, Hughes says that Herke has not visited the facility. So he was obviously frustrated and has raised some questions about why he and Mike Anderson were the people that were let go because of this.

**CATHY WURZER:** I think they call themselves scapegoats in your interview. I'm wondering here, Commissioner Herke is going to be allegedly testifying. He's scheduled to testify before the Senate Veterans Committee tomorrow about the allegations. Any indication that the timing, the firings were intentional leading into this hearing?

**CHRISTOPHER MAGAN:** I will say I don't want to speculate on what the motivation was here, obviously. But I mean, it is obviously right before the commissioner is going to speak to the committee. And I know that he will make some type of a statement and take questions from the committee. I have been told that he spoke with Governor Walz late last week.

So I would say that while the caregivers who raised these concerns said that they tried for a number of years to get attention to the matter, it seems now that the leadership is focused on it, and as well as the Senate Committee, as you mentioned, is going to have a hearing tomorrow evening. Herke will testify as well as some other folks. And we'll be interested to see what he says and why the decision to dismiss these two top workers was made when it was.

**CATHY WURZER:** And we should also say that the Hastings Veterans Home is part of a, I presume, bonding bill request to renovate that facility. Does that have anything to-- is that reflected in any of this? Is that at play too?

**CHRISTOPHER MAGAN:** Well, I will say that the facility is over 100 years old. And there's broad bipartisan support and has been broad bipartisan support to replace the facility out there. And I talked to a number of lawmakers that are actually sponsors of the piece of the bonding bill that would spend \$78 million, which is the state's portion of a larger project that's over \$200 million, and most of it will be covered by the federal government.

But they have said that they want these issues to be addressed, but they don't see them as intertwined. So I know that there obviously is some concern with the amount of attention being paid to what's going on out there, but I think that it's something that still has a lot of support at the Capitol, and there's a lot of hope it'll get done this year.

**CATHY WURZER:** Say, Christopher, I'm curious. We're talking about the Hastings Veterans Home here, but there's also, of course, the care home in Minneapolis. Any indication of problems there?

**CHRISTOPHER MAGAN:** I've been told some of the same similar issues from workers there. And they both were managed by Mike Anderson. So there is a nursing facility in Minneapolis that's separate from the two care homes that are in Hastings in Minneapolis.

The care home in Minneapolis has room for about 50 veterans. The one in Hastings, it's about 150. And I've talked to workers in Minneapolis who've also raised similar concerns about staffing levels and just the workplace being real difficult just with leadership and issues that they've had.

**CATHY** So have you had a chance to talk to any lawmakers about this?

**WURZER:**

**CHRISTOPHER** Yeah, I talked at length with Senator Erin Murphy, who is going to hold the hearing tomorrow. And I've also

**MAGAN:** spoken with some members of the House, and they all are-- they say that they're taking the allegations very seriously. Murphy has said repeatedly that it's a priority to find out what's going on and to address it both for her and the DFL caucus.

**CATHY** All right. Christopher, excellent reporting. Thank you so much.

**WURZER:**

**CHRISTOPHER** Thank you, Cathy. I appreciate you having me on.

**MAGAN:**

**CATHY** Christopher Magan is the Capitol Bureau reporter for the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*.

**WURZER:**