

Senate Committee on Judiciary | February 1, 2023

Workplace Violence Testimony by Tom Dee

1. Good morning, my name is Tom Dee, President and CEO of Southwestern Vermont Medical Center in Bennington. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning in front of this joint hearing. I also appreciate the work being done by Senator Sears and Senator Lyons on the critical issue of workplace violence.
2. I have been the CEO of SVMC for the past 13 years. My health care career spans 45 years of which 34 years has been as a hospital CEO.
3. We are a small health care system in the southern region of Vermont, employing approximately 1300 people. Prior to my position at SVMC, I spent my career at larger facilities in the Hudson Valley region in New York State.
4. Never in my years in health care leadership have I seen such a level of physical and verbal abuse, violence and intimidation of health care workers.
5. We must protect our patients and staff from the ever-growing threat of workplace violence. The board and executive leadership at SVMC have taken many steps to protect our workforce over the recent years...for example:
 - a. We increased our security presence by transitioning to an external security firm at the hospital.
 - b. We contracted with the Bennington Police Department and the Bennington County Sheriff's Department for additional coverage within our Emergency Room (at an annual additional cost of over \$400,000).
 - c. We installed an additional 75 security cameras throughout our hospital campus.
 - d. We provided specific risk avoidance training for our Emergency Room staff in addition to a mandatory hospital wide safety training program for all of our staff called AVADE.
 - e. We have instituted a bi-weekly Workplace Violence Taskforce which I sit on to oversee all of our internal employee safe guard activities.
 - f. We implemented a protective No-Trespass policy and procedure for removing threatening and harassing patients, family members and visitors.

- g. We have and will continue to conduct active shooter drills in partnership with local police agencies.
 - h. We installed lockdown and panic button devices in the Emergency Room as well as within the hospital.
 - i. We created response teams to deal with challenging patients and visitors when incidents arise.
 - j. And we are commencing a community wide communications campaign regarding our expectations of appropriate behavior within our hospital with a No Tolerance policy.
6. Despite these steps, in the past year, 61% of our clinical staff have reported physically aggressive behavior towards them. In 2022, we had 183 workplace violence events (that were reported) and we are on track to go beyond that number this year.
 7. We cannot and will not sit back....The new reality requires us to focus even more of our attention and resources on this ever-growing problem.
 8. I personally have a fiduciary and moral obligation to protect our employees and the patients we serve...but we need your help!
 9. We realize what we are experiencing are major societal issues impacting our entire country but our mission at SVMC remains clear... to provide exceptional and safe care to the patients we serve.
 10. We cannot serve our mission if our workforce is under siege.
 11. I am very proud to say that we have one of the finest nursing care teams in the country, being recognized as one of a select few five-time Magnet Award winning nursing organization in the U.S.
 12. This morning, we have two of my nursing colleagues here to speak about their experience of workplace violence. We could have easily brought many more.
 13. I want to personally thank Senator Sears for recently visiting with representatives from the SVMC emergency staff to hear first-hand what is taking place in our hospital and within other Vermont hospitals.
 14. Thank you all for your time and interest in listening to their stories.