



Medical transportation firm continues to leave patients waiting

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By Martha Shanahan

Seven months into a three-year contract to provide transportation to doctor's appointments for hundreds of thousands of people on Medicaid in Connecticut, state officials, medical providers and patients say the company's insistence that it is improving doesn't match up with the stream of stories about missed pickups and poor customer service for some of the state's most vulnerable patients.

Dialysis patients have been left stranded at clinics, sick children have missed doctor appointments and people who use wheelchairs have been told none of the transportation companies that have contracts with the firm have a wheelchair-accessible vehicle.

Representatives from Veyo, the company that won a \$7 million-per-year transportation contract for Medicaid patients in January, on Wednesday told state legislators and members of a working group called the Medical Assistance Program Oversight Council that, based on its own records of wait times at its call centers and data showing decreasing numbers of complaints, the situation is improving.

"We are very adequate," said Dave Coppock, the regional director for Veyo, which is a subsidiary of Arizona-based Total Transit.

But the medical administrators, advocates and public health officials who spoke during Wednesday's meeting and in interviews this week said the anecdotal evidence they have seen and heard from clients contradicts Veyo's account.

A woman stranded at an appointment had to flag down a taxi on the road and pay \$50 for the ride home, said Amy Greika, a program manager at a residential care home in Willington. **A child with cerebral palsy waited at an appointment for nearly two hours while his ventilator used up battery power, said Bonnie Roswig, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy.** Medical facilities have had to pay out-of-pocket so their patients could get home, Ledge Light Health District supervisor Jennifer Muggeo said.

Muggeo said she asked members of the Southeastern Connecticut Health Improvement Collaborative to report how problems with Veyo have affected southeastern Connecticut.

"We have had to divert local resources to provide transportation and to advocate for people because the transportation benefits ... have fallen short," she said.

Most health care professionals and HUSKY Health members say that while Logisticare, Veyo's troubled predecessor, caused its own problems for patients, the first seven months of Veyo have not been an improvement and in many cases is more taxing for patients and health care providers alike.

"It continues to be disturbing," Roswig said. "Things are not improving ... the bottom line is that we still have not solved this problem."

Coppock said the company recently began a review of its more than 70 transportation providers — including cab companies, out-of-state livery firms, ambulance companies and its own roster of Uber-style independent drivers who drive their own cars on behalf of Veyo — and plans to sanction or end its contract with any not performing well.

As of May, Veyo already had ended its contracts with Harry's Taxi, Harry's Livery and Red & White Taxi in New London, and Rose City Taxi in Norwich.

The medical rides they were giving — up to 1,800 rides a month for Harry's Taxi in March and closer to 100 rides a month for Rose City Taxi — are now taken by other local cab companies like Norwich Taxi, by subcontractors like Sky Transpor-

tation that hire their own drivers, or by Veyo's fleet of independent drivers.

The Department of Social Services fined Veyo a total of \$4,000 in May and June for violating the provisions of its contract multiple times, including forcing Medicaid recipients to wait more than an hour for a pickup on eight occasions, the Connecticut Mirror reported last month. Veyo also was fined \$1,000 in February, after an immunocompromised patient was transported with others in the vehicle, when he or she wasn't supposed to be.

In a report Veyo submitted to the state in June that breaks down reported call center wait times, missed and canceled rides, the performance of all the transportation providers shows that the company recorded 364,539 trips in May, the last month for which numbers are available. Veyo says it received more than 100,000 calls in May, up by more than 10,000 calls a month over April. The average hold times, percentage of abandoned calls and complaints all went up between April and May.

Those violations, and the complaints and canceled calls in the monthly reports Veyo submits to DSS, may not reflect all the difficulties people have either getting a ride to come on time or getting access to the bus passes Veyo sends out to Medicaid members who live near public transportation, health officials said.

"If even a fraction, (if) 10 percent of those cases are true, there are systemic issues that need to be addressed," Karen Buckley, a vice president of the Connecticut Hospital Association, said at Wednesday's meeting.

Not all patients who are left without a ride or get picked up late will report it.

"Just because their complaints are down doesn't mean the issues are not happening," said Yolanda Bowes, the director of outpatient operations for United Community and Family Services in Norwich. "It may be working most of the time but it's not working all of the time."

People visiting UCFS facilities still are being left without a ride home, missing appointments because their rides are late or not receiving the bus passes they're supposed to receive. These difficulties can cause patients to miss important appointments, said Brianna Weller, UCFS's supervisor of community outreach.

"I think that can deter our clients from coming," Weller said. "It's leading to undue stress and really deterring them — they're not going to want to come if they can't get here."