

Tough year for Veyo, state's multi-million dollar Medicaid transportation broker

By JOSH KOVNER

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A year into its multi-million dollar contract with the state, the California-based company hired to arrange thousands of daily rides to medical appointments for sick children and adults on Medicaid remains perhaps the most problematic and criticized among the state's human-service vendors.

What healthcare advocates and legislators have found most baffling is that Veyo's missteps – no-show rides, stranded patients, a dearth of wheelchair vans, dialysis patients hospitalized because they missed clinic appointments, immune-deficient children forced to share taxi rides against doctor's orders -- have occurred under the nose of the state Department of Social Services.

Near the top of the draft human-service agenda prepared by Gov.-Elect Ned Lamont's transition team is this statement: "Fix the non-emergency medical transportation system."

Veyo, under contract until 2020, has been paid \$8.4 million since Jan. 1, 2018, according to state records, and has use of \$160 million of the state's Medicaid dollars to provide about four million non-emergency rides each year, through a network of about 70 private taxi and van companies and a roster of about 240 independent, Uber-style drivers. Veyo also issues bus passes.



In the December meeting of the state panel that monitors non-emergency medical transportation, DSS official Rod Winstead, in defending his department's ability to watch over Veyo, noted that the company has been fined \$20,000 for various contract violations.

That didn't go over well with Rep. Cathy Abercrombie, a Democrat of Meriden who, as co-chair of the human-services committee, jostled with Veyo's predecessor, Logisticare, for months before a new contract was awarded to Veyo, along with the hope of improved service and accountability.

"With all due respect, \$20,000 -- that's a joke for what's been going on in the state for a year," said Abercrombie, who also chairs the state panel.

"You guys should be doing a much better job in following up ... It's going to be a major issue in human services for 2019," Abercrombie said, adding that the sanctions for contract violations "should be more severe."

"We're not talking about taking people to the grocery store," Abercrombie said. "We're talking about medically fragile individuals for the most part, whether it's a child on the [autism] spectrum who has trouble getting into a cab or someone going to dialysis ... "

Questions about whether some of Veyo's practices violate federal Medicaid laws hover over the company. For example, when a transportation broker like Veyo denies a ride to a Medicaid patient, it is supposed to provide advanced notice so the person has a chance to make another arrangement.

There is evidence that Veyo has not consistently provided those notices. It reported in August that it had denied trans-

portation requests 15,083 times in June. In a subsequent November report, after advocates questioned the high number of denials, the June figure was revised downward to 623 denials, which was closer to the number of notices that were actually issued.

Kathy Flaherty, executive director of the Connecticut Legal Rights Project, and attorney Bonnie Roswig of the Center for Children’s Advocacy, each questioned the disparity in the figures in public meetings but have not received an answer from Veyo.

A spokeswoman for Veyo, Saramaya Penacho, supplied this response in an email to The Courant:

“The number was not ‘revised’ - the number was reported differently, due to request by DSS, to be reported as the number of members with denied trips ... to mirror the reporting structure that occurs with Veyo and DSS.”

Roswig said there are valid reasons to deny a request for a ride, but that Veyo’s service-denial rate is far higher than any of the state’s other Medicaid providers.

Another concern came up at the December meeting: patient advocates said Veyo has been telling elderly Medicaid recipients that if their hometown offers dial-a-ride vans, they must use that service and were no longer entitled to the Medicaid transportation. Lawyers representing Medicaid clients have said that assertion is false and illegal.

Rep. Mike Demicco, a Democrat of Farmington and a member of the state panel, raised this with Veyo general manager David Coppock. “Veyo is responsible for any trip to an eligible member,” Demicco said. “It’s not accurate to be told that it isn’t responsible if a town offers dial-a-ride.” Coppock agreed it would be improper, but denied that the company had taken that position.

Service to patients in wheelchairs has been a sore point since Veyo started its work in Connecticut. Abercrombie said she was told by the Association of Connecticut Ambulance Providers that on 400 occasions, people in wheelchairs were assigned ambulances rather than the much less expensive and more appropriate wheelchair vans. She said ambulances should only be assigned if they are medically necessary.

She told the social-service department’s Winstead, “It’s your responsibility, now that I’ve red-flagged this, to oversee some of these claims and to make sure they are proper ... I don’t want to hear that someone has gotten caught [by] a Medicaid audit.”

Winstead said he knew nothing of the 400 ambulance rides, but welcomed anyone to report suspected Medicaid fraud to his department and it would be investigated.

To Coppock, she said that Veyo has apparently not made full use of the state’s private fleets of wheelchair vans, forcing companies to cut back on those services. She said Veyo’s Uber-style drivers had regular passenger cars, for the most part, and could not serve the wheelchair clients.

“When we went down this road [with Veyo], we lost a lot of our wheelchair providers,” Abercrombie said. “I think we have a huge shortage in the state because of that. They sold their fleets, they laid off their people.”

Abercrombie said patients “need to be transported in the proper mode of transportation.”

This story was updated to reflect an email response from Veyo.
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