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Canceled rides and stranded patients as case builds against Medicaid transportation broker Veyo, state social services agency

By JOSH KOVNER
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Patients are at the mercy of a Medicaid rides program that has been the subject of a stream of complaints since the vendor began 13 months ago. During that time, Veyo, of California, has earned \$9 million in fees from the state. Veyo is the subject of a \$33 million federal class-action lawsuit.

It's a situation that has frustrated advocates for Connecticut's Medicaid population, among the poorest, sickest children and adults in the state.

On the one hand, settlement talks have gotten off to a promising start in a \$33 million class action lawsuit brought against the state and its Medicaid broker by legal aid lawyers on behalf of patients stranded by Veyo. The California company is paid millions to arrange as many as four million non-emergency taxi and van rides a year.

"There hasn't been much disagreement with the stories we've been presenting," lawyer James Haslam of Connecticut Legal Services said of the nine patients who are the named plaintiffs in the lawsuit. "There have been productive discussions at the table over short-term fixes aimed at getting people to their doctor's appointments — getting them there, and getting them there on time, every time. There is also a larger discussion about systemic fixes."

Yet, even as the talks proceed, the complaints persist about Veyo's performance and about the quality of the Department of Social Services' oversight. "We continue to get calls every day because people aren't being picked up and aren't getting the care they need," Haslam said.

This disconnect exists even though Lamont's administration appears "to be committed to bringing relief to our fellow residents," he said. Lamont has declined to reappoint Social Services Commissioner Roderick Bremby and a search is on for a new commissioner.

Haslam said "bridges have to be built over the gaps" in services. The breakdowns often occur when patients or their nurses, doctors or social workers are speaking to Veyo's call center. Increasingly, rides are cancelled without the advanced notice required by federal law, and patients who in many instances have had these rides for years are stranded.

"The individual doesn't know what's happening. All they know is the ride didn't show up," Haslam said.

The deficiencies have been highlighted every month in legislative meetings since Veyo started on Jan. 1, 2018, and were pegged as priorities in the human services arena by Lamont's transition team.

Veyo, under contract until 2020, has earned \$9 million in fees since it started 13 months ago, records show, and it has control of \$160 million of the state's Medicaid dollars.

As the complaints have mounted, transparency has diminished. A panel of advocates and lawyers that used to track complaints and monitor the contractor's response has been disbanded. In its place is an internal group that includes Medicaid recipients chosen by Veyo. Advocates, lawyers and the press aren't invited to its meetings.

"My hope is that a new commissioner will look at this whole program with a fresh eye and also understand the obligation to the public," said lawyer Bonnie Roswig of the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford.

A second informal settlement conference between the two sides is expected before a formal session is scheduled with U.S. Magistrate Judge Holly Fitzsimmons, Haslam said.

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