



Anchorage child psychiatric hospital scrutinized in federal inspectors' investigation

Alaska Public Media | By **Casey Grove**

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North Star Residential Treatment Center on DeBarr Road in Anchorage on Oct. 17, 2022. (Casey Grove/Alaska Public Media)

One of Alaska's only providers of psychiatric treatment for children is under increased scrutiny after reports of patients escaping a hospital, write-ups by federal regulators for various "deficiencies" and lawsuits alleging patients were sexually abused.

North Star Behavioral Health operates three campuses in Anchorage and is the state's only provider of psychiatric care for children under the age of 12. It's also often the only in-state option for families or state case workers trying to find residential care for a child suffering from an acute mental health crisis.

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But some advocates for North Star's patients have been asking whether the hospitals are meeting their obligation to protect and treat those children, many of whom have been put there by the state Office of Children's Services.

The Anchorage Daily News has been looking into those questions, and the ADN's Michelle Theriault Boots says her most recent reporting started with **a report of an escape in June** from one of North Star's DeBarr Road facilities.

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Michelle Theriault Boots: A patient there hit a fire alarm, which unlocked the doors. And four young patients, all minors, fled the hospital and roamed around Anchorage for hours. By the time they were tracked down and returned by police, one of the patients was so intoxicated, they had to be hospitalized at another hospital. And that was one of the incidents that brought the federal inspectors from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid to the hospital to do, kind of, an emergency look at the conditions there.

Casey Grove: You mentioned this was one of the incidents that led to an investigation. What else did the investigation find?

MTB: Yeah, a few months before that, the federal investigators had come to North Star and documented what they found to be problems with the way the hospital was using seclusion as a tool for controlling patients. And seclusion is when basically you get locked in a room or you're put in a place where you cannot leave and you're alone. They also found incidents in which patients had assaulted other patients sometimes causing injuries. And they faulted the hospital for, I think in one case, not letting the parents of the patient know that the patient had been assaulted. They also noted that there was a patient that had been there for, I think, over a month and hadn't really received any treatment, hadn't received, I think even a single therapy session that they were supposed to, which is, you know, the whole point of the hospitalization, is to receive those services.

CG: So, in the course of this investigation, what ended up happening with North Star and the federal regulators?

MTB: Yeah, usually the way it works is federal regulators come, and they can kind of

immediate jeopardy situations right away. And in this case, I think there was just one immediate jeopardy situation and the hospital fixed it. When I asked the hospital for comment, they said that they were in, you know, as of September, they were in good standing with the federal regulators, and they didn't have any, they weren't under what are called "plans of correction" or any other sanctions at that time.

CG: And I take it that North Star didn't really comment too much beyond that, right?

MTB: Yeah, North Star has said they're bound by, you know, strict patient privacy rules. And so they don't comment on anything that involves any incident, that involves a specific patient, though, they did for a subsequent story confirm to me that the, I think that their words were, that the hospital had, quote, "experienced elopements," which, plain English, means patients had escaped.

CG: So we have a little window into what's going on in this place that we don't normally hear about, kind of, the inner workings of a hospital like this. What are advocates like the group Facing Foster Care, or folks with the Disability Law Center, telling you about what this means about this hospital?

MTB: I think for many years, advocates, including former patients and families of former patients, have been saying some of the same things. They have complained about the quality of care. They have reported some of the same things the federal inspectors found, such as assaults, escapes, patients not receiving the care, quality therapy, that they're sent there for. What I've heard from speaking to some of those advocates, is that this is sort of a validation to have the federal inspectors find the same problems.

CG: So then, what's the upshot here? I mean, is it just that we know now a little bit more about what's going on at this hospital? There aren't any big plans right now for the federal regulators to come in and change things there. So what's the upshot?

MTB: Well, I think most recently, you know, every time we publish a story about this, I hear from people. I hear from patients at North Star. I hear from families. Sometimes I hear from professionals and former employees or even current employees. And after publishing these first stories, I found that there had been a lawsuit filed just at the end of September, by the family of a boy who says he was sexually abused there while a

another family who said they pulled their son out just last month because he, they also allege, was sexually abused there. So **my most recent story** was about two families who alleged that their children were sexually abused while patients at North Star and that raised quite a few questions about North Star's ability to supervise its population and raised some troubling questions about that.

CG: You know, I have to ask, what has North Star said, if anything, about those cases?

MTB: North Star said that they had followed all the appropriate reporting procedures and were working with police and communicating with families in those cases. And again, they said they couldn't say much more because of patient privacy rules.

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