

Astorino to hire new medical provider for jail

VALHALLA — Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino has cut a deal to hire a private health-care company to treat county jail inmates — despite a last-minute pitch from Westchester Medical Center to continue providing the medical services.

The three-year, \$45.5 million agreement with Correct Care Solutions of Nashville, Tenn., one of the nation's largest prison-care providers, will mean layoffs at the medical center, where 75 employees currently staff the facility. The agreement would take effect July 26. It requires final approval and is on the agenda for today's meeting of the county Board of Acquisition and Contract.

"It's certainly within their right to go with whomever they want," medical center chief executive Michael Israel said. "We will cooperate to the best of our abilities to ensure a smooth transition."

Peter Piazza, president of Unit 9201 of the Civil Service Employees Association, urged the county to "strongly reconsider" the proposed deal with CCS. "I think it's a foolish move for the county to hire a company from the outside," Piazza said Thursday.

If approved, the deal would come a decade after the county's last flirtation with privatized health care for county jail inmates, when the deal led to at least two inmate suicides and subsequent lawsuits.

According to records reviewed by The Journal News, Correct Care Solutions has also had legal troubles, and has been named in 140 federal lawsuits since 2004.

County officials said that's one reason why the contract would make sense — CCS would give the county indemnification from any legal claims at the facility. "This is a business where lawsuits are not uncommon," said Ned McCormack, director of communications for Astorino. "But when we compared them to other companies in the business, this is the group that our team recommended. They're a big enough company that they have the financial wherewithal to defend themselves, and that gives us the ability for them to give us the indemnification. That risk really is taken off the table for us financially, and that was a big important thing."

Medical center officials said staffers currently at the jail will have a right to apply for other jobs at the hospital based on seniority. That would bump others with less experience out of jobs. The staffers could apply for jobs with CCS, but would likely lose their state pensions and benefits. In addition to civil service union members, the other employees are represented by the New York State Nurses Association.

Westchester County officials began shopping for a private vendor for inmates after a Jan. 25 letter from Israel saying the hospital could no longer afford to provide the health-care services. Westchester Medical Center had been performing the service for about \$12.5 million in what was essentially a barter agreement.

Israel later put in a bid to extend its deal at a price tag of \$15 million. The county said it was rejected because it did not include some costs, such as off-site psychiatric services. It also did not insulate the county from any lawsuits, which they said can cost taxpayers about \$300,000 a year.

CCS would pay \$14.2 million in the first year, which the county said would save between \$1 million and \$3 million overall. The cost would be adjusted in the second and third years based on the Consumer Price Index. "At the end of the day \$3 million is \$3 million," McCormack said. "We've got a \$166 million deficit. We did the vetting of these guys and other guys, and we felt that they could provide us with the right balance of operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness."

The county last hired a private company for inmate health care in January 1996. The first company, EMSA, came under fire when a 17-year-old inmate from Bedford hanged herself in her cell after being taken off the antidepressant drug Zoloft.

EMSA's jail psychiatrist, Dr. Harvey Lothringer, was blamed for the incident, which led to a **\$1.45 million legal settlement** with the teenager's family. Lothringer had previously served four years in prison for manslaughter for dismembering the body of a College of New Rochelle student who died during an abortion he performed. He later had his license restored and worked for the county jail, and later for EMSA.

At the time, one of EMSA's vice presidents was Jerry Boyle, who later founded and now runs CCS, the company Westchester now wants to hire. McCormack, the county spokesman, said that wasn't an issue, noting that Boyle was in business development out of EMSA's Florida offices at the time and not involved in the jail's day-to-day operations.