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Audio/Radio - State Politics or Policy Feature

Elly Yu: California Nursing Homes Are Becoming 'De Facto Mental Health Centers'

LAist 89.3

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Link to audio: <https://omny.fm/shows/news-reports/california-nursing-homes-are-becoming-de-facto-men>

Note: this is the on-demand version of our broadcast feature which aired on the same date. For on-demand, the host lead is read by the reporter.

Host: Nursing homes typically help people recover after surgeries or provide round the clock care for people with physical disabilities. But a new Las investigation finds that thousands of people with serious mental illness are living in California's nursing homes. Experts call it warehousing and say the practice may violate federal law. I'm Las, investigative reporter, Ellie Yu.

Feature:

Hyde Park Health Care Center is a nondescript nursing home in L A about 10 miles southwest of downtown. But inside...

"It was a psych unit. We had a security guard at the front door 24/7. There's no need in a nursing home for a security guard 24/7.

That's Travell Jackson. She worked as a nurse at Hyde Park. She says most residents there had a serious mental illness and she didn't receive training by the facility to care for them.

"Paranoid schizophrenic psychosis bipolar disorders, lots of psychotic patients just yelling all day, some would be yelling, some would be on lithium."

An LAist investigation found that 74% of residents at the nursing home had a serious mental illness last year. Using federal data, we found nearly 100 facilities in the state where more than half of residents had those diagnoses. Kevin Martone is New Jersey's former health commissioner and now advises states on best practices.

"Nursing homes generally are not the right setting for people with serious mental illness. They're segregated settings and you know,

people can generally be served in community-based services with the right types of supports.”

Experts who reviewed our findings told us that state and local governments could be in violation of a 1999 Supreme court ruling called Olmstead. It says people with disabilities can't be unnecessarily institutionalized and segregated from the rest of society here in California.

Our investigation finds the percentage of people with serious mental illness in nursing homes has been rising. They've become sort of the de facto mental health centers but they don't have the specialized training. Rachel Tait is with the Ombudsman's office that oversees nursing homes in LA County. She says she often sees people with psychiatric disabilities stay in nursing homes because there's a lack of housing and other mental health services in the community.

“I mean, we as a society have failed them because there isn't necessarily a better option at this moment. Where where else do you go at that point?”

Our investigation also found that people with serious mental illness often lived in nursing homes for a year or longer. Tony Chicotel is a staff attorney with the California Advocates for nursing home reform.

“For most residents with serious mental illness and nursing homes. The nursing home, just serves as a warehouse, keeping them alive, keeping them fed and sheltered and out of the streets and out of people's way.”

At Hyde Park. Travell Jackson says having so many residents with serious mental illness made it hard to do her job and she felt the facility wasn't giving the residents what they needed.

“There are no programs running to keep the mental health patients occupied. They're lumped in with the elderly with inappropriate activities, coloring books and just watching television.”

When reached for comment, a company that helps run Hyde Park says their focus is to provide the best patient driven health care in providing a safe environment for their patients and staff. Jackson often wondered about how these residents ended up in a nursing home.

“I asked them, how did you end up here all the time? How did you end up here? Where's your family? Some were just too far in their illness to give me a straight answer and their mental illness. It's just sad.

She says she just morally didn't feel right, working at the facility and also felt unsafe. So she left in September of last year.

For LAist 89.3. I'm Ellie Yu.