

The New York Times

They Want To Forget Us – Psychiatric Hospital Workers Feel Exposed

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By Danny Hakim

By mid-March, the staff at the Rockland Psychiatric Center in Orangeburg, N.Y., was growing frustrated.

Patients in the center's two inpatient buildings were continuing to gather for daily group therapy sessions, making social distancing difficult, and some workers believed they needed to stop. There were not enough test kits or protective gear, workers said. And some worried that patients being transferred from hospitals in New York City had not been adequately screened for the coronavirus.

The administration soon convened town halls to discuss the concerns. Employees were told that they should not be taking hand sanitizer or masks out of the hospital, but some complained that little of either was available anyway, according to people who were present. Soon patients and staff members began getting sick, including the medical chief.

Now, at least 30 Covid-19 deaths have been recorded in the state's system of 23 psychiatric centers, and roughly a third of them have been at Rockland. State officials said 10 patients at Rockland had died, and union officials said one employee was also dead because of the virus.

More than 13 percent of Rockland's patient population is confirmed to have or suspected of having Covid-19.

The state's other hospital hit hardest by the pandemic is the Pilgrim Psychiatric Center in Suffolk County, where nine patients have died, according to the state. Nearly a fifth of the patients are either confirmed or suspected cases of Covid-19.

The New York Times interviewed clinicians, union officials and employees with a wide range of jobs at the two hospitals, from nursing to food services, and reviewed a number of internal documents. Many of the employees spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of losing their state jobs.

"The staff is getting sick constantly. We are severely depleted in staff," one Rockland clinician said.

Tyjuana Parker, the vice president of the union local that represents civil service employees at Rockland, has been working at the hospital because of staffing shortages. "All of us could be walking around here with it," she said. "We don't know. It's a lot of fear."

Psychiatric hospitals present special challenges to the strictures of social distancing, since many patients are allowed to come and go in and out of the center, and once inside they are not cloistered.

Group therapy sessions are a central part of many patients' routines. "Prior to this crisis, they would talk with their peers, play cards, play bingo, do normal recreational activities," a nurse at Rockland said. Now such things are on hold.

The patient population is already at high risk. "Because of the medications they take, their immunity is already compromised," the nurse said.

James Plastiras, a spokesman for the state's Office of Mental Health, which oversees the two hospitals, said in a statement that the agency "has taken numerous actions to protect staff and patients and reduce the risk of exposure in our facilities." He said the state had provided face masks to staff members and patients, bolstered screening procedures for new admissions and eliminated group therapy sessions for the duration of the crisis.

Rockland and Pilgrim are among the oldest of the state's psychiatric hospitals, with both opening in 1931. In the 1950s, Pilgrim alone had nearly 14,000 patients, its own power plant and fire and police departments. Rockland had a bowling alley and was decorated with W.P.A. murals. Both were referenced in Allen Ginsberg's beat poetry classic "Howl."

Today, after decades of deinstitutionalization aimed at curbing the warehousing of the mentally ill, the hospitals are ghosts of their former selves, their sprawling campuses strewn with shuttered buildings (much of the show "Orange is the New Black" was shot at Rockland). The two centers have about 600 patients combined.

As at so many facilities that house people closely together — in particular the nation's nursing homes, where at least 7,000 have died amid the pandemic — workers find themselves unexpectedly on the front lines of a public-health crisis.

"It just hit," said Arnold Jones, who has worked at Pilgrim for 33 years and now heads the Civil Service Employees Association local that staffs the center. "New York is a hot spot, and Suffolk County is a hot spot within the hot spot. So there's a lot going on here."

At Rockland, like at other hospitals, supplies of personal protective equipment have been a flash point. On March 27, the executive director of the facility, Janet Monroe, emailed the staff: "We had a call from our central office where now we are required to account for PPE inventory and use daily," she wrote, adding that the center "will not be giving out masks as a daily routine." Instead, infection control nurses would guide how such equipment would be used.

“They’ve got my members spraying Lysol on masks, and yet they’re saying everything is OK,” said Wayne Spence, the head of the Public Employees Federation, the union that represents nurses and clinicians at the center.

He said his union had given 1,500 masks to Rockland alone, taking on the unusual role of providing medical equipment to its members. The union has also spent nearly \$170,000 on hotel rooms for nurses, he said, largely because the workers do not want to infect their families. Forty of the 238 nurses at Rockland are confirmed to have Covid-19.

“Buying this stuff is almost like a drug deal,” Mr. Spence said of protective gear. “You’re worried people will outbid you.

“So, securing the masks has been a problem. Even though the governor has said members are supposed to get one mask per day, it’s more like one mask per week. That’s what our members are telling us.”

The civil service union has warmer relations with the Cuomo administration — its workers have a contract, while Public Employees Federation negotiators have been at loggerheads with the state over a new deal — and officials said they felt their workers had been provided with adequate protective equipment. But they were also struggling to maintain staffing levels.

“There’s just a fear factor,” said Ms. Parker, the Rockland union vice president. “Those coming in here should get hazardous pay.”

On April 3, the commissioner of the state Office of Mental Health, Ann Marie T. Sullivan, told the work force that, while the agency had faced “every level of catastrophes” over the decades, the pandemic was “challenging us in a way that a blizzard never could.” She asked for a moment of silence every day at 3 p.m. to reflect on the workers, family members and friends who had been lost.

Still, many fretted that so little attention had been focused on their plight.

“No one ever talks about what we do,” Mr. Jones said, adding, “they treat us the same way they treat the mentally ill. They want to forget us.”

Correction: April 24, 2020

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article misstated who had died at the Pilgrim Psychiatric Center in Suffolk County. According to the state, nine patients have died, not nine workers.