

Isabelle Oss
9/25/2024
Mulvihill

CEO of Steward Health Care Refuses to Testify as Senate Committee Holds Hearing on Company's Bankruptcy



Steward Health Care CEO Ralph de la Torre's testimony before the Senate panel. Sept. 2024. Matthew J. Lee/Boston Globe Staff

A panel of U.S. senators labeled the CEO of for-profit Steward Health Care a medical terrorist after he failed to appear at a hearing last Thursday on Capitol Hill. The panel will vote next week to hold him in civil and criminal contempt.

The Senate's Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions issued a subpoena for Ralph de la Torre to testify after his company fell into bankruptcy in May, leaving patients without care and employees without work. U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, D-VT, criticized De la Torre for spending \$160 million on personal purchases while Steward hospitals struggled to find buyers for their 33 facilities across the nation.

The live-streamed hour-long hearing featured testimony from former nurses at Steward hospitals, Massachusetts state lawmakers, and officials from Louisiana, where communities have been especially impacted.

"They are killing our patients. They are killing our communities, and they need to be held accountable," Louisiana State Rep. Michael Echols told the panel. Louisiana's Glenwood Regional Medical Center in West Monroe employs nine percent of the region and has been in financial jeopardy since Steward's bankruptcy, he said.

Steward consistently failed to staff its facilities properly despite employees' pleas for more nurses, according to witness testimonies.

Audra Sprague, a former nurse at Nashoba Valley Medical Center in Ayer, Massachusetts, which shuttered on Aug. 31, described bringing her son to the ER for a life-threatening diabetic complication. There were two nurses on staff to care for 18 patients that night, she said.

"To ensure that my son received the critical, time-sensitive care he needed, I had to be his nurse that night, not his mother. And he deserved to have both," Sprague said.

Ellen MacInnes, a former nurse at St. Elizabeth's Medical Center in Brighton, Massachusetts, said patients sat in the emergency department for hours to days due to a lack of supplies and staff. Nurses spent their own money on necessities like food and bereavement boxes for families of deceased children, said MacInnes.

The company failed to pay vendors, amassing \$9 billion in debt at the time of Steward's bankruptcy, according to news reports.

Stacy Mitchell, mayor of West Monroe, Louisiana, and a member of the Glenwood Medical Center community advisory board said she was contacted by a landscaper who provided services to the hospital. Mitchell said he had been waiting months for Steward to foot the \$72,000 bill.

"It is imperative that when individuals or companies invest in critical infrastructures such as healthcare, that they do so in a responsible manner and that they have their patients and the well-being of all in mind," Mitchell said. "In Steward's case, there was a failure to uphold this responsibility."

The committee will vote on Sept. 19 to enforce the subpoena of de la Torre and hold him in contempt. If approved, the case will go to the full U.S. Senate for a vote and de la Torre could be criminally prosecuted.

"If Dr. de la Torre thinks that he is comfortable with not being here today, Dr. de la Torre, you are wrong. This will be pursued," Sanders said.