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### Prison board is satisfied

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SUNBURY - Members of Northumberland County Prison Board said they are satisfied with a report submitted Wednesday by top officials from PrimeCare Medical Inc. that addresses various concerns with their service, including allegations by two former employees of not properly treating inmates at the prison.

The internal investigation report was discussed during a 75-minute executive session in the law library at the 137-year-old prison, but specifics were not revealed when the prison

board meeting reconvened.

When questioned after the two-hour meeting, Thomas J. Weber, an attorney representing PrimeCare, said allegations made against the correctional healthcare company are "baseless." He said healthcare improvements have been made at the prison since the company was hired. He also said PrimeCare has passed all its inspections, including those conducted by the National Commission on Correctional Healthcare.

#### MRSA

Dr. Carl Hoffman, president and corporate medical director with PrimeCare, said there was no discussion by prison board members during the executive session over retaining or curtailing their healthcare services at the prison.

Hoffman and Todd W. Hastings, vice president of operations with PrimeCare, confirmed that there have been cases of MRSA at Northumberland County Prison, which are common in prisons, hospitals and nursing homes. They said the number of cases found in the Sunbury prison are slightly lower than other institutions.

Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) is an infection with a specific type of bacteria. MRSA is different from a regular staph infection in that the bacteria are impervious to the effects of antibiotics like penicillin and methicillin. Thus, once a diagnosis has been confirmed, additional tests are needed to determine what antibiotics may be useful in treating the disease.

MRSA was once primarily confined to healthcare settings, like hospitals and nursing homes. However, it is now quite common in the community at large, making the disease a serious concern for public health officials.

Hoffman added, "There's always been MRSA in prisons and healthcare settings. There's MRSA at Geisinger Medical Center and schools. But it's no worse than before."

PrimeCare officials, who totaled 10 at the meeting, agreed to make county sheriff department employees aware of any prisoners afflicted with MRSA so they can take necessary precautions when transporting them to and from the prison.

#### Outside agency

Hastings said PrimeCare officials addressed various concerns with prison board members during the executive session. He said county officials were satisfied with their response to the allegations and other findings contained in their report.

Commissioner Stephen Bridy, chairman of the prison board, said, "PrimeCare addressed every issue we had in its report, including the allegations made against it by former employees."

Although he failed to gain a second on his motion at the beginning of the meeting to discuss some of the issues in the report in public, Commissioner Vinny Clausi said he was OK with the responses offered by PrimeCare, but warned that if any of their findings are proved to be untrue, "there will be problems."

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Commissioner Richard Shoch said he was satisfied with PrimeCare's findings at this point.

Julie Miller, who claims a relative's health was adversely affected by PrimeCare when he was in the county prison, urged the prison board to hire an outside agency to conduct an investigation into PrimeCare.

Miller said she has documentation supporting her claims against PrimeCare.

The Sunbury woman, who started crying toward the end of her comments, said she has complained to the county commissioners and PrimeCare employees in the past about how her relative was treated, but received no satisfaction.

Dave Sprout, a paralegal with the Lewisburg Prison Project, a nonprofit inmate advocacy group, told The News-Item his group has sent letters to the state Department of Health and Department of Corrections requesting an independent agency to conduct an investigation into PrimeCare to determine if any of the allegations leveled against it are true.

Somerset County

PrimeCare, which is based in Harrisburg, is no stranger to the allegations being made in Northumberland County.

They are similar to what Somerset County Commissioner Joe Betta claims has been happening at the county jail in that southwestern Pennsylvania county, where an investigation is taking place.

Also, in 2006, The Morning Call of Allentown published an extensive investigative article entitled "Is Quality of Prison Health Care in Jeopardy?" that includes details of a number of lawsuits involving PrimeCare, including 16 in Northampton County alone.

In Northumberland County, the commissioners and PrimeCare administration acknowledged last month the company would be investigating the allegations, which were initially made anonymously by two former employees to The Daily Item. The News-Item confirmed the names of the two workers; one had been fired and one resigned citing the allegations.

They claimed in their interview with The Daily Item that inmates were not treated in a timely manner; that medicines would run out and inmates would have to wait up to a week for refills; that medical records and charges included untrue statements to make the provider look more professional than it was, and that documented reports of inadequate treatment or misconduct by supervisors were ignored.

PrimeCare, which has defended its reputation, has been providing medical services to Somerset County since 2004. The latest three-year \$500,000 annual contract ended Dec. 31, and the commissioners and PrimeCare agreed to operate on a month-to-month contract until the investigation ends.

Somerset County Jail has capacity for approximately 100 inmates and has at least 40 employees. PrimeCare employs four full-time nurses, a supervisor and several nurses at the prison.

Betta, who has been approached by former and current prison employees and former and current employees of PrimeCare who worked at the jail, was instructed by his own board of commissioners, district attorney and president judge to turn over the testimonies to Somerset Borough Police.

Betta said he was first approached by a former PrimeCare employee in October about the alleged mistreatment of inmates, but he was not satisfied with the results of an internal investigation by PrimeCare that turned up "no significant findings."

He started taking statements from several inmates, five correctional officers and four former nurses about the mistreatment of inmates, a hostile work environment, sexual harassment and falsified records and time sheets.

"I am convinced these are not former disgruntled employees, but they left on their own because they did not want to partake in the falsification of the records and mishandling of narcotics," Betta said.

Employees told him that they were too scared to talk for fear of losing their jobs, he said.

A former PrimeCare nurse at Somerset County Jail contacted The News-Item last month and agreed to provide comments on the condition of anonymity. Her former employment status was confirmed by Betta.

"They say we are disgruntled workers. No, we are not. We are honest, caring nurses," she said. "The truth needs to come out. People's lives are at stake."

She agreed with Betta, saying the alleged treatment of Northumberland County inmates sounds like the experiences she witnessed.

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She cited a lawsuit filed last year by inmate Ronald D. Sever, 48, as an example.

Sever is seeking \$50 million in damages for cruel and unusual punishment for being refused treatment after a noxious spider bite. While Dan Rullo, the Somerset County solicitor, has called Sever's claims "fantasy" in the media, the unidentified nurse said the inmate isn't lying. She said her frequent requests for the man to be taken to the hospital to be treated by a doctor were ignored.

She was told by several prison guards that she was the only one who would do her job at the prison, and that many inmates were shocked when she treated them.

PrimeCare has "total indifference" to inmates' needs, she said.

Last month, the prison board gave Betta notice to cease and desist his investigation, and the president judge of the county told him he was a "security risk" and could no longer meet with anyone inside the jail. He could, however, meet with anyone outside the facility.

PrimeCare is described on its website as a privately owned, nationally accredited, correctional health care company that provides medical services to approximately 18,000 inmates in juvenile correctional facilities, jails and prisons throughout the northeastern U.S., including at least half of Pennsylvania's 67 counties.