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19 Mar 2013 | *The Daily Item (Sunbury, PA)*

Prison project rep: Probe needed

SELINGSGROVE — A member of a local nonprofit inmate advocacy group said allegations that a correctional health care company falsified prisoners' medical records in the Northumberland County Prison should be investigated by the Pennsylvania Department of Health.

Two former PrimeCare Medical Inc. employees who worked at the Sunbury jail in Northumberland County claim the company falsified medical records and withheld or provided wrong medication to inmates at the facility

That's a disturbing allegation, if true," said David Sprout, a paralegal with the Lewisburg Prison Project. "When you have inmates at someone's mercy, it has to be an in-depth review from an outside agency."

The Lewisburg Prison Project filed a class-action lawsuit against Northumberland County over inadequate medical care and housing conditions that was settled for \$1.5 million in October 2010 and led to the hiring of PrimeCare, based in Harrisburg.

Sprout said his agency had no part in selecting PrimeCare. "We just wanted someone reputable," he said, adding that he was surprised to learn of the allegations against the company that provides medical services to about 18,000 inmates.

Complaints he's received from Northumberland County Prison inmates about their health care have been minor since PrimeCare took over.

To ensure inmates are protected, though, Sprout said the state Department of Corrections should bring in an outside agency like the state Department of Health to investigate.

Despite the claims made by one fired PrimeCare employee and another who quit, Snyder County Prison Board Chairman Malcolm Derk continues to support the health care company, which has delivered medical services to inmates in the county's Selingsgrove jail for

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about four years.

"Operating a prison is like running a mini-hospital. PrimeCare has raised the level of recruiting professional staff and improved quality of our care," Derk said.

He stands behind the company and its employees despite a recent incident that resulted in a summary harassment charge being filed against PrimeCare nurse Rebecca Bickhart and the termination of Snyder County Jail correctional officer Randy Noll.

Bickhart pulled a prank on Noll while on duty at the jail last October, and Noll allegedly responded by cornering her inside a vacant cell and using a stun gun on her, injuring her arm.

"PrimeCare has quality employees. That doesn't mean there won't be some that make a mistake, but you don't throw out the whole firm," Derk said.

Regarding the complaints against the company in neighboring Northumberland County, he said, "It has nothing to do with our facility. It's a different county and different people, and we've been very pleased with how they've responded" to inmates' needs.

Derk also questions the source of the allegations and why they chose not to speak out openly.

"There are whistle-blower laws," he said of the federal law that protects employers who allege illegal activities by an employer.

Email comments or questions about this article to mmoore@dailyitem.com.