

Houston, Texas hospital remains locked over financial dispute, putting hundreds of patients at risk

Chase Lawrence
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The Heights Hospital in Houston, Texas, remains locked, with the situation still unresolved after the hospital was closed without warning last Monday. The closure is the result of a financial dispute over a loan payment between the owner of the hospital, AMD Global and Arbitra Capital Partners LLC, as well as the non-payment of maintenance, repair, and property insurance.

Dr. John Thomas, an internal medicine specialist who is affiliated with the Heights Hospital, told the WSWS that all the locks were changed over the weekend when the medical facility is typically closed, with staff only finding out on Monday. Dr. Thomas stated that Dr. Felicity Mack was treating “quite a few” COVID-19 patients at the hospital before it was shut down, and that around 100 coronavirus tests were being performed at the hospital per day.

According to Dr. Thomas, hospital staff were only allowed to go in briefly on Tuesday and take personal belongings before the hospital was locked again. When asked about patient records Dr. Thomas stated “they are all locked up. We were allowed to get personal belongings.”

Dr. Thomas stated bluntly that the lockout was not only immoral, but illegal: “It is illegal. We have a duty to the patients to provide 30 days’ notice. And they broke that law. It is called patient abandonment; we have to give 30-days’ notice.”

“The reason behind this is purely financial. The company who took control of this hospital does not care, does not care about their wellbeing. It is completely unacceptable to deny people healthcare. Its 100 percent money driven. They don’t care about anyone else, they don’t care about the laws, about doing

the right thing.”

When asked about the impact of the lockout on patients he stated that not transferring patients’ records would mean that treatment details, medication records, and other data is effectively lost and that diagnostics on patients would have to be redone as patients typically don’t remember the minute details of their treatment. Additionally, patients would have to find new doctors and a place to get treated, all delaying potentially vital medical treatment.

Speaking of the neighborhood where the Heights Hospital is located, Dr. Thomas stated, “That area is under-served, there is only one other hospital in the area. It hurts a lot of people. It’s a shame that people become so greedy and there is so much greed involved in healthcare.”

The hospital, located in the Heights, northwest of downtown Houston, serves what is referred to by the US Department of Health and Human Services as a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA), which are characterized by a low availability of health services. Harris County, where Houston is located, is a partial HPSA as designated by the US Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). The Heights Hospital lies within North Central Houston which is listed as an HPSA by the HRSA. The HRSA calculates HPSA scores based on the population-to-provider ratio, the travel time to the nearest health care provider outside the area, and the total population below the federal poverty level.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation drawing from data from the HRSA, 81 million Americans live in a primary care HPSA as of September 2020. Texas is the second highest in population for primary care

HPSAs, with 7.4 million living in shortage areas, and California ranking first at 8 million. According to the HRSA January 2021 estimates, the number living in primary care HPSAs stands at 83 million, meaning the number of people living in under-served areas has increased by 2 million in four months.

Houston is currently suffering one of its worst health disasters in recorded history in no small part due to the efforts by the Republican state Governor Greg Abbott as well as Democratic Mayor Sylvester Turner, who have worked to reopen schools and non-essential businesses against scientific evidence and the advice of health professionals.

Almost 300,000 have been infected with COVID-19 in Harris County according to Worldometer, with more than 4,013 deaths, an increase of around 13,000 cases and 147 deaths since five days ago. Many of those who have been infected will require long-term care for the variety of long-term ailments resulting from the virus.

Throughout the country hospitals have been closing despite the increased need in health care caused by the pandemic, with a January 2021 Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform report stating that more than 500 rural hospitals were at immediate risk of closure before the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly stemming from financial losses and a lack of reserves to continue operating. One year into the pandemic that number has risen to more than 800 rural hospitals at immediate or high risk of closure.

It is an absolute indictment of the for-profit healthcare system and the financial oligarchs that benefit from it that hospitals should be shut down in the middle of a pandemic, let alone when 83 million already lack sufficient access to primary healthcare, in the richest country in the world.



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