

Hospital Staff 'Looking for Reasons to Make Trouble' Amid COVID, CEO Says

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Matching the surge in COVID-19 cases is a surge of healthcare workers who won't speak to journalists for fear of losing their jobs.

Why the sudden spook? The top brass at hospitals and healthcare systems across the country have become so concerned about reputation that they've been issuing gag orders to their staff, prohibiting them from speaking to the press. Some physicians and other healthcare workers have been disciplined or even fired for speaking up about shortages of personal protective equipment or concern for their colleagues' safety.

The problem is much larger than hospital reputations, however, and many have spoken up in concern that the practice will [negatively affect public health](#).

Yet the unofficial policies persist. Just last Thursday, April 9, the CEO of Woodhull Hospital, in Brooklyn, called out employees for speaking to the press. Administrators at the hospital, one of eleven in NYC Health + Hospitals' public system, host a daily conference call to keep employees up to speed on rapidly changing situations and policies. Recent calls have left staffers anxious about being reprimanded for speaking up for safety concerns for themselves and patients, employees said. In last week's meeting, a recording of which was obtained by *Medscape Medical News*, hospital CEO Gregory Calliste chastised employees for speaking to journalists about various concerns. The following is an excerpted transcript of that video conference:

Greg Calliste: ...So for example, I mean one staff, one employee called, called my office and he was threatening because I said that we're going to...we may have to revoke the approval of some leaves. So, you know, the employee believes that I'm infringing his right, his religious rights because he needs to — he needs the time off for religious purposes, et cetera, et cetera. So he was threatening to go to the newspaper to make the newspaper know what Greg Calliste is doing at Woodhull Hospital in trying to deprive people of their rights to religious...whatever.

Another employee obviously, I guess one of those who had been asking a lot about the telecommuting, apparently has been taping my town hall meetings and has gone to the newspaper with certain claims concerning what Greg Calliste is doing including the fact that I'm overriding the directive from the governor and the mayor, because the governor and the mayor says that people should stay home and telecommute and I'm denying people of telecommuting and all of that stuff. And then taking certain lines and quotations from my WebEx, the things that I said, and saying that I threatened to fire people, and to people who are telecommuting that I'm accusing of everybody who wants to telecommute. [That] I'm accusing them of milking the system and hiding and all of that stuff. So people are just taking things and they're using things for their benefit and to be able to create problems for us who are trying to do our job.

I'm just trying to do my job. I have a tough job to do; I have some tough decisions to make and I'm not afraid to make decisions. And I'm not afraid to say anything that I believe is as fair and is honest and is upfront, so I refuse to be bullied or intimidated or blackmailed by anyone. So I will continue to make those decisions that I have to make for the benefit of us the staff, the patients at Woodhull Hospital and Woodhull. So let's just keep doing folks, and the folks who are looking for reasons to make trouble for us then let them do what they have to do because I would certainly continue to do what I have to do as a CEO of the hospital.

Okay, so that's my little — just my little pep talk just to let folks know some of the garbage that I have to deal with. You don't see these things, and sometimes when people see and know the stuff that I'm dealing with says, well how come you're still so upbeat and you're still so cool and calm and — you know — collective and all of that stuff. That's because I believe in my heart that I'm fair, I'm doing the right things and I'm just trying to make sure that Woodhull

and our patients and our community and the staff survives and succeeds. So thank you very much for everybody who has been kind of pitching in to make sure that happens and we can continue making Woodhull a model hospital and a hospital of choice for North Brooklyn.

So one update today: You know, we did get some clarification from central office, Human Resources and Legal, concerning time off and unscheduled absences. I did distribute it to all of the department heads, so make sure that you touch bases with your department head to get the update. But there's nothing in this clarification or this memo that can refute anything I've been saying. The bottom line is that we expect people to be here, the staff, the employees to be here. We expect to do everything that we can to make sure that we can provide sufficient coverage, to provide coverage for the hospital, and that if people call out.... The people who are not calling out but are just not coming in — the no-show, no-call, no-show — they should be given without pay time, without pay.

The people who call out with no reasons, just calling for no prime reason, whatever personal reasons, again they should be docked without pay. People calling out for unscheduled annual leave for personal reasons, again, they should — we should kind of make sure that we try to find out what and why and how.... The core notes we got in unscheduled sick leave unrelated to COVID, again those people we have to make sure that if they have no real reasons, no documented reasons, they should take it without pay. And just continue to do everything that you do to make sure we can be fair to the...[unintelligible] as we are trying to be fair to Woodhull and to try to make sure that we can continue to have coverage supports.

If you have genuine reasons for being out, please let us know. If you're sick, please make sure you get a doctor's note. If you are sick for COVID or un-COVID, un-COVID related reasons, please make sure you touch base with Employee Health or Occupational Health so it can be documented so that we can do what we have to do to make sure that we can verify that you do have a condition that warrants you being out. Again, if it's a COVID-related condition, there are certain things that we are supposed to do to make sure that you can continue getting paid. We have said this over and over every day that we have had these town-hall meetings, we have kind of clarified that so I'm assuming that by now everybody understands the obligation to contact Employee Self Service, Occupational Health to be able to report the symptoms and your illnesses and that kind of stuff so that we can continue to do what we have to do.

So that's my update and let's just kind of go around the room and see if there are any other updates from the leadership team....

Sheila Eldred is a freelance health journalist in Minneapolis. Find her on Twitter [@MilepostMedia](#).

Do you have information on how your hospital or health network is responding to PPE shortages, gag orders, or other related issues? Has anyone you know faced disciplinary measures for speaking out? Write to us: news@medscape.net.

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