

Citing Portland's opioid lawsuit, hospitals withdraw from groups seeking to treat addiction

 [pressherald.com/2018/05/17/citing-citys-opioid-lawsuit-mercy-hospital-withdraws-from-greater-portland-addiction-](https://pressherald.com/2018/05/17/citing-citys-opioid-lawsuit-mercy-hospital-withdraws-from-greater-portland-addiction-collaborative/)

collaborative/
By Joe Lawlor

May 17, 2018

The parent of Mercy Hospital is leaving partnerships it has with Portland and Bangor to increase access to substance use treatment, saying the move was prompted by a lawsuit that Portland recently filed against opioid manufacturers.

Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems announced Thursday that it was leaving the Greater Portland Addiction Collaborative and a similar group in Bangor. Eastern Maine Healthcare, a nonprofit, also is the parent of Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor.

The city of Portland filed a \$1 billion lawsuit against pharmaceutical companies in April, blaming the companies for causing the opioid crisis. While the primary defendants included large corporations such as Purdue Pharma, Teva and Cephalon, one of the five physicians also named as a defendant is a former Mercy Hospital primary care doctor. Bangor joined several Maine communities in a similar lawsuit in December.

Related

In lawsuit, Portland accuses opioid manufacturers of greed

“The allegation that EMHS, or formerly EMHS-employed physicians, caused the opioid abuse epidemic is legally and factually baseless, and defending it will be a waste of time and resources that could otherwise be directed to the health and well-being of the people of Maine. We will vigorously defend ourselves against these baseless allegations at the appropriate time and place,” EMHS spokesman Chris Facchini said in a news release Thursday.

It wasn't clear what EMHS, which is not named in the lawsuit and wouldn't comment about it beyond its statement, hoped to achieve by leaving the partnerships.

COLLABORATIVE FAILS TO GET FUNDING

Mercy was one of the leaders of the Greater Portland Addiction Collaborative, which, among other things, sought to secure funding from “Pay for Success,” a program started under President Barack Obama that connects investors with innovative approaches to societal problems.

Despite many meetings, including numerous trips to Washington, D.C., and the White House in 2016, the addiction collaborative has so far not received significant funding from the program, which moved from White House oversight to become an independent program after President Trump took office in 2017. If the collaborative had secured funding, it could have meant an infusion of millions of dollars into Greater Portland. While the collaborative hadn't applied for a

specific amount of funding, typical “Pay for Success” grants have been in the \$5 million to \$15 million range.

Related

Advocates still working on regional effort to fight opioid crisis, receive funding

“Regrettably, from this point forward, EMHS and its member organizations, including Eastern Maine Medical Center, Acadia Hospital and Mercy Hospital, have no choice but to end our participation in the Community Health Leadership Board and the Greater Portland Addiction Collaborative,” Facchini said in the statement. “Both organizations are partnerships between health care providers and local government that seek to reduce stigma and increase understanding of substance use prevention, treatment and recovery.

“We likely will be forced to withdraw from other, similar efforts across the state if other cities and counties join the suit.”

The Greater Portland collaborative’s partnership included Mercy, the city of Portland, Community Housing of Maine and other local nonprofits.

Portland spokeswoman Jessica Grondin said the city would have no comment on Mercy Hospital’s departure from the collaborative.

Related

Lost: Heroin’s killer grip on Maine’s people

The opioid crisis has fueled overdose deaths throughout Maine, including a record 418 deaths in 2017, according to state statistics. Maine has so far not devoted many resources to treatment, according to substance use treatment experts, but has, with a new law, clamped down on prescribing opioids for chronic pain. There is insufficient evidence that opioids are effective in controlling chronic pain, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

SUIT TARGETS TWO MAINE DOCTORS

Ed Gilman, a Mercy Hospital spokesman, said the hospital’s involvement in the addiction collaborative will need to be “put on hold,” but it hopes the matter can be resolved. Gilman said existing Mercy programs for substance use disorder will not be affected.

“Unless there are changes to the lawsuit, Mercy Hospital’s participation in the Greater Portland Addiction Collaborative (GPAC) will need to be placed on hold,” Gilman said in a statement.

“This is done with a heavy heart, as Mercy has worked tirelessly to convene, lead and grow the collaborative to what it is today. However, due to the ongoing work of our dedicated

community partners, we are hopeful that the advancements made by the collaborative will continue. While our work with GPAC may be on hold, we look forward to re-engaging as soon as this legal matter is resolved.”

Related

Even amid crisis, opioid makers plied doctors with perks

The suit alleges that 20 drug manufacturers and five doctors who prescribed opioid painkillers knew the drugs were effective for short-term use but that opioids are addictive and subject to misuse, particularly when used for long-term pain relief. The Maine doctors listed in the lawsuit are Dr. Mark Cieniawski, who was formerly affiliated with Mercy Hospital, and Dr. Doug Jorgensen, who has a pain medicine practice in Manchester.

Cieniawski was put on a two-year probation by the Maine physician licensing board in April 2017 for “excessive prescribing of opioids and failure to meet standards in prescribing,” according to the lawsuit filed by Portland.

Jorgensen was one of the doctors highlighted [in a December 2016 Maine Sunday Telegram story](#) outlining payments to doctors from pharmaceutical companies. Medical ethics experts criticized the practice, saying it represented a conflict of interest.

Jorgensen received 60 percent of all pharmaceutical company payments to doctors in Maine related to opioids, or \$42,522 from August 2013 through December 2015, including \$28,519 in 2015.

Jorgensen, in a statement in January 2017, defended the payments, saying they were “no different than a computer software developer interacting with Microsoft or an oncologist seeking updates on chemotherapy from a pharmaceutical company.”

In a brief phone interview Thursday with the Press Herald, Jorgensen said EMHS is “doing what they need to do to protect themselves” legally.

He added that the Portland lawsuit is “ridiculous” for “going after the doctors individually and blaming them” for the opioid crisis.

Cieniawski could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Joe Lawlor can be contacted at 791-6376 or at:

[\[email protected\]](#)

[Twitter: joelawlorph](#)

Share



Related Stories



Latest Articles