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Tears and anger: Some linger for Saratoga nursing home resolution, others move to new facilities

Tom Dixon 307-266-0616,

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Deseret Health and Rehab resident Truth Karstoft sits on her bed surrounded by her belongings Monday, May 11, 2015. Deseret Health took over management of the Saratoga nursing home, along with another in Rock Springs, after Deseret Health cut off funding. Karstoft was told she would be moved to a nursing home in Laramie and staff members here ordered the Saratoga home to stay open temporarily. (Alan Rogers, Star-Tribune)

Alan Rogers, Star-Tribune

Charlotte Gibbons waited in her wheelchair, staring pointedly, silently at the north-facing doors of the place she used to call home.

Two men from Cheyenne were on their way to take her to a nursing home in the capital city. They were late.

Nearby, a woman tucked her chin to her chest and let out low, whooping sobs. A nurse tried in vain to comfort her.

Gibbons, age 80, was a resident of Deseret Health Care and Rehab in Saratoga. She was one of the few who had a choice whether to leave now or stay and find out whether the facility will remain open.

Until early Monday, it was understood everyone needed to be moved out as soon as possible. The parent company, Utah-based Deseret Health Group, was facing bankruptcy. It gave notice last week it was closing facilities in Rock Springs and Saratoga. It stopped paying for food, medical supplies, wages and benefits. The state stepped in to provide temporary management Friday afternoon, but residents were expected to be relocated by midweek.

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Carbon County Commissioner Sue Jones said she asked the governor to give a potential buyer more time to purchase the business from Deseret.

“I tried to tell them there are a lot of other options than relocating people,” Jones said.

The nursing home is only a viable business to someone if it still has residents and staff members, she explained. The state agreed to stop moving residents out until Friday, at which point it will reassess.

The decision came too late for many.

Kathy McMorrow took her mother to Rawlins on Monday morning. She used to see her every day. Now, it may be only twice a week.

She isn't sure if her mother really understands why she had to leave her home of the last 18 months.

Staff members broke the news to residents and families May 4. McMorrow remembers being scared.

“I worried about my mother. I was worried she would end up somewhere I couldn't go see her as often,” McMorrow said.

Gloria Kendrick, 74, was worried too. She moved to Saratoga from Virginia. The climate agrees with her, she said. She has had just one asthma attack in the six years she's lived at the nursing home.

On Monday afternoon she tossed a bouncy blue ball around a nearby park and watched her friend's dog chase after it. She is staying in Saratoga as long as it remains open.

“This is my home,” Kendrick said. “I'm not going anywhere.”

In April, 27 people called the facility home. By Monday, only 12 people remained.

Deseret Health Group runs facilities in Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska and Utah. Its founder, Jon Robertson, served prison time and owed \$150,000 in restitution to the IRS for filing a false tax return in 2003 as president of another nursing home management company called Infinia.

Some members of the community worry history is repeating itself.

“The last two weeks have been emotional: There’s anger, then there’s crying, then there’s anger,” said Tonya Bartholomew, who works at Platte Valley Medical Center.

The community has rallied around the nursing home, though. The Corbett Medical Foundation covered the staff’s bounced paychecks Friday. Volunteers have been bringing pets, guitars and flutes to entertain residents. On Monday, the parking lot overflowed with cars, and volunteers inside moved furniture, packed clothes and comforted residents.

“This is about human beings, not process,” said Jones. “The criminals who got us in this situation are the least of our concerns right now.”

Jones and the staff members at the nursing home are pinning their hopes on Joe Rude, owner of Montana-based Health Management Services. He is trying to broker a lease agreement with Deseret this week.

Gibbons, though, was tired of the uncertainty.

When the nursing home staff members finally arrived, she directed somebody to plug in her oxygen tank. Workers lined up to give her hugs. She told a couple people she loved them.

Then the two men from Cheyenne wheeled her out the north-facing doors.

Follow reporter Tom Dixon on Twitter @DixonTrib.