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No Health Care For You!

Local Retiree Looking For Answers After Being Booted By Crystal Run

News By Brian Dentz



Ellenville resident says 'patient excellence rep' yelled at her. Crystal Run, Middletown

ELLENVILLE - Donna Baker, 71, figured she's learned plenty about medical bureaucracy from a four-decade career in nursing. Baker

never expected that she would get booted in October from Crystal Run, the health care provider she's used for most of this century, for reasons the company still hasn't explained.

Baker, who lives in Ellenville with her husband, suspects Crystal Run may have taken umbrage after she filed six complaints by August about what she said was the company's faulty system for filling prescriptions by phone, and the seven-business-day waiting period before they were filled.

Why? In August, Baker fielded a call at home from a woman named Lisa, who identified herself as a "patient excellence representative," refused to reveal her last name, and proceeded to yell at Baker about those complaints.

The fallout came nearly three months later. On Oct. 20, Baker got a certified letter – unsigned – from Crystal Run. The message was blunt: "Crystal Run Healthcare will no longer be providing you with medical care," it read. The deadline was 30 days from Oct. 13, the date it

was written. That gave her about three weeks to replace the half dozen doctors whom she relied upon for serious medical issues including thyroid cancer, brittle bone disease, orthopedic back and neck problems, and gastrointestinal issues.

“There are no endocrinologists in this area,” Baker said. “I don’t have a thyroid anymore. Without my medication I will die.”

Her calls to Crystal Run went nowhere. No one had any answers. And even though they agreed her case had been “mishandled,” the company refused to reinstate her or do anything about the matter.

Now Baker, a nurse for 20 years for the Ulster Correctional Facility in Ellenville and a nurse before that for two decades at the American Red Cross, is embroiled in a legal fight with Crystal Run, which is based in Middletown and is ultimately owned by United Healthcare Group, the largest health insurance company in the United States.

She sought assistance from politicians, including Congressman Marc Molinaro, whose office staff refused to look into the matter for her. She hired civil rights lawyers and, with their help, is trying to pry loose an answer to a simple question: Why did she lose critical healthcare? Was it because she complained? And, just as important, who decided to drop her?

Most Give Up

Months of back and forths with Crystal Run have provided few answers as Baker and her lawyers hope to persuade the company to take her back on. Crystal Run, which says on its website that it has more than 400 physicians in almost 50 specialty areas throughout the Hudson Valley and lower Catskills, hasn’t responded to numerous emails and phone calls from the Shawangunk Journal seeking comment.

It’s little surprise that America’s healthcare system, and the associated insurance industry, is complicated and confusing, and many people say they struggle with

the cost of medical bills. Some 70 percent of respondents in a recent poll by research firm Perry Udem said they've never appealed or fought a healthcare bill because they didn't know they could or weren't confident they could win.

The worst part? Getting tossed out of coverage, as in Baker's case, may not be common, but it's perfectly legal. That's according to Diane Spicer, the supervising attorney at Community Health Advocates, a non-profit organization picked by New York state as its health insurance consumer assistance program.

"There is nothing in the law that forces a private provider to see anyone," Spicer said. "I'm not that surprised. What's required by the law is really just what she's getting."

That's not exactly encouraging, especially for people facing medical issues.

"I don't think there is anything illegal about that notice," she said after reviewing the letter Baker received.

Still, Spicer said anyone in Baker's situation should feel free to contact her organization and ask an advocate to negotiate a solution. Visit www.cssny.org, for more info.

'Critical Import'

In the meantime, Baker's lawyer, Jonathan Golden, wrote Nov. 3 to Douglas Sansted, Crystal Run's chief administrative officer requesting "to respectfully seek reconsideration and reversal of this decision." The letter also said, "This sudden lapse in Ms. Baker's care is of critical import, because, as noted, she suffers from several serious medical conditions requiring consistent ongoing care."

Goldman did manage to discuss the matter with representatives of Crystal Run. He declined to comment about any ongoing negotiations.

Still, all Baker's upcoming medical appointments were canceled. While her medical insurance is still in effect, the Crystal Run-associated doctors with whom she has had long-term relationships won't treat

her. As of mid-December, she hasn't been able to find replacements. In the meantime, she said she's rationing life-saving medications.

What's worse, Baker is still unclear about just why her care was terminated. All that Crystal Run's letter said was, "We are enclosing a copy of Crystal Run Healthcare's Patient/Visitor Code of Conduct for your review." It didn't explain why those rules were included in the discharge letter or what she might have done to violate the code of conduct, if anything.

For now, Baker plans to keep fighting to return to the doctors who have cared for her for more than a decade.

"I know them and they know me," she said. "They know my conditions. I don't have to explain everything when I go in from the beginning. But nobody there gives a damn."