

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

Ensuring VA's Security: How Can Congress Best Support VA's Law Enforcement?

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Chairwomen Kiggans, members of the committee, thank you for the privilege of addressing you today on one of Sentara Health's top priorities – the safety of our employees, patients and all visitors who walk into our facilities.

I am Kapua Conley, Regional President for Sentara Health.

Sentara is an integrated delivery network with 12 hospitals in the Mid-Atlantic, a health plan and more than 30,000 employees. Our largest hospital, a Level 1 Trauma Center is just miles from Naval Station Norfolk, and we serve many active duty, veterans and their families.

Keeping our employees, patients and visitors safe is a responsibility we take very seriously, as you will hear from my comments today.

From my perspective "Security is both a feeling and a reality. And they are not the same." Making our employees and patients feel safe is just as important as keeping them safe.

The statistics around workplace safety in a healthcare environment are staggering.

We know that healthcare workers are **5X more likely** to experience violence compared to those in any other private profession. Outside of law enforcement, an emergency department is the second most dangerous workplace.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that healthcare workers account for 73% of injuries from workplace violence. The threat to nurses, physicians and other healthcare workers has been on the rise since 2011.

Those statistics are our reality on the front lines of healthcare.

Sixty-four handguns, 1,204 knives, 158 box cutters, 84 tasers and two machetes – this is an inventory of weapons intercepted at the doors of emergency departments in just two Sentara hospitals in a little over a year.

In total, security personnel have prevented nearly 2,484 weapons from entering Sentara Norfolk General and Sentara Virginia Beach General hospitals during that time.

Our Security Team seeks to first prevent and deter violence within our facilities.

Second, we seek to protect our employees, patients and visitors from harm or injury should a violent incident occur.

Prevent and Deter Workplace Violence

To prevent and deter violence, Sentara has implemented sophisticated, state-of-the-art, AI-driven Concealed Weapon Detection Systems. Over the next two years, every hospital will have this system in place.

When our CEO, Dennis Matheis, sat down with some of our front-line employees to discuss this initiative, he was concerned about push back, as hospitals are havens of healing. One nurse reminded Dennis that our children walk through metal detectors every day going to school. This is now the new normal.

In addition, Sentara has implemented a Visitor Management System that allows us to know who is entering any of our facilities and whether they are authorized to do so, reducing criminal acts and workplace violence.

Also, in addition to thousands of CCTV cameras located throughout our hospitals, we have personal duress alarms and a new Emergency Notification System to better communicate with our teams and take proactive action.

All front-line employees are trained on de-escalation, and Sentara has implemented cutting edge Active Shooter Training, including a full-scale active shooter drill involving our emergency services community partners.

Protect Our Employees, Patients and Visitors

To ensure the highest level of safety, Sentara recognizes the need to be proactive, not reactive. Each and every member of our team is critical to the safety of all. This responsibility to keep each other safe is engrained in our culture and built into our daily protocols, training, and technology.

Every nurse has the capability and responsibility to flag patient medical records for individuals who exhibit threatening behaviors. Our support staff follow the buddy system when serving these patients. Security patrols keep a close watch on units with potentially violent patients, and they make sure that flags in our electronic medical records match signage in the units. Patient flags are evaluated every 12 hours and removed if a patient is no longer a threat.

Multi-disciplinary Core Threat Assessment Teams in each division review all workplace violence incidents, ensure appropriate use of flags, analyze trends and root causes, and recommend additional training and protocols to maximize safety. These teams rally on short notice when there is an urgent need for a coordinated and decisive response to potential threats.

Our in-house security professionals are essential to our strategic approach to safety. Sentara is training an elite team of Security officers to receive certification by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. And we are implementing Video Magistrate rooms that permit police and staff to directly link with a magistrate to provide evidence and swear out an arrest warrant in real time for a criminal event that has or may occur.

Conclusion

Again, "Security is both a feeling and a reality. And they are not the same."

This needs to be taken into consideration when looking at our own veterans medical facilities. Sentara stands ready to collaborate and partner with the VA system on how best to assess, support and implement best practices in safety and security at these facilities.

We have made an investment in safety which has returns beyond a dollar amount. I hope that the VA system will do the same.

I am happy to take any questions at the appropriate time.