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Milwaukee County Moving Inmate Health Care In-House By 2021

Private Company Has Persistent Staffing Issues; 5 Deaths Since 2016

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Milwaukee County will start providing medical services to inmates by 2021, following several years of privatization that resulted in understaffed facilities and multiple prisoner deaths.

Beginning April 1, the county will enter into a two-year, \$39 million contract with Wellpath, a private health care company that provides both physical and mental health care in local jails, detention centers, state and federal prisons and state psychiatric hospitals.

Over the next two years, the county will begin transitioning to in-house medical care. Doing so is the best way to deliver quality care and guarantee accountability and transparency,

County Board Chairman Theodore Lipscomb Sr., said in a written statement.

"Milwaukee County employees are best equipped to provide quality health care to inmates and detainees at the jail and House of Correction," Lipscomb said. "Caring for those who are in our custody is a core function and a tremendous responsibility. As public servants, Milwaukee County employees are committed to providing the high-quality services that taxpayers expect."

County Board Supervisor Dr. Sheldon Wasserman, an OB-GYN at Columbia St. Mary's Hospital in Milwaukee, said bringing health care in-house will be like creating a mini-hospital in two locations. He said people in jails are some of the sickest people in Milwaukee County, with high rates of mental health issues and substance abuse problems.

"The preventative medical services that they have not been able to seek in the community, all of the sudden are the problems of the community," Wasserman said. "We, as taxpayers, have a constitutional obligation to care for them because they are wards of the state."

Wasserman said it will take at least two years to create a system to provide care and probably 128 people at minimum to be hired.

"Correctional health care is very different than standard health care, and there are a lot of people who don't want to do that," he said. "Historically, correctional health has been staffed by some of the more deficient members of the health care community."

An [audit last year](#) [1] by the Milwaukee County Comptroller's Office found the private, Florida-based company contracted to provide health services at the jail and Milwaukee County House of Corrections continuously understaffed the facility for nearly two years.

In 2017, the two facilities housed more than 2,100 inmates. The county paid Armor Correctional Health Facilities \$16 million to provide health services, a price tag totaling almost 20 percent of the total cost to run the facilities. Former Sheriff David Clarke supported privatizing health services at the jail. Armor has been under contract since 2013.

Clarke's move to hire Armor was criticized after four deaths took place in the county jail in 2016 over the span of six months. A [fifth inmate died](#) [2] in 2017.

After heading the department for 15 years, Clarke resigned in 2017. Sheriff Earnell Lucas was elected in April 2018.

Armor's contract expired at the end of December 2018, but was extended by Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele's administration through March 31, while contract negotiations with Wellpath were being finalized.

The three-month extension cost Milwaukee County \$5.7 million.

Day-to-day oversight of the inmate health care contract will remain under the superintendent of the House of Corrections.

Nashville-based Wellpath became the largest contractor of correctional health care in the country last year when it formed following the merger of Correct Care Solutions and Correctional Medical Group Companies.

According to the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#) [3], Wellpath has had similar complaints as Armor as far as inadequate staffing levels.

Wasserman said Wellpath is not a perfect solution, but something the county has to be comfortable with for the next two years. The county will also spend \$373,000 on a partnership with an independent, third-party organization to monitor the care provided through Wellpath.

"We don't have that many players going into this playground," Wasserman said. "I think we're getting best of the bunch, but I would not typically say this is exactly what we would want."

Source URL: <https://www.wpr.org/milwaukee-county-moving-inmate-health-care-house-2021>

Links

[1] <https://milwaukeecounty.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=6451284&GUID=709648CA-133F-4569-813E-6CB49A97723D>

[2] <https://www.wpr.org/inmate-dies-milwaukee-county-jail>

[3] <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/milwaukee/2018/12/20/firm-recommended-inmate-medical-services-had-problems-elsewhere/2355358002/>