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Watchdog group says methadone clinic tossed unshredded records

Middle Tennessee Treatment Center's chief thinks documents were stolen

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Nashville's methadone clinic is being accused of throwing away patient records without shredding them, jeopardizing clients' privacy and putting them at risk for identity theft.

Alex Friedmann, an ex-offender and vice president of Private Corrections Institute, a watchdog group that opposes prison privatization, says he has obtained roughly 50 pages of patients' information that came from Middle Tennessee Treatment Center's unlocked Dumpster. These documents include private information such as the names, Social Security numbers, addresses and phone numbers of patients who receive methadone, a synthetic opiate medication that eliminates the severe withdrawal symptoms of heroin.

"This is incredibly improper. These are confidential records," Friedmann said. "There is a stigma attached to people undergoing methadone treatment. If this information got in the wrong hands, it could jeopardize people's jobs and their standing in the community."

Debbie Crowley, the center's chief operating officer, said patient information is never thrown in the garbage without being shredded. She said she suspected that the documents were somehow taken from the center and promised that a full investigation would be conducted.

"Maintaining the confidentiality of our clients is paramount," Crowley said. "This is not how we do business."

Friedmann said the records were taken from the Dumpster on June 28 but wouldn't say who brought them to him.

Crowley did not learn about the unshredded documents until Tuesday. She said she planned to contact the patients who are identified in the records to inform them of the situation.

"As far as I'm concerned, these documents were obtained illegally," Crowley said.

Friedmann fears that the clinic's actions could place patients at risk of having their identities stolen. Forty-three patient names and seven of their Social Security numbers can be found in the tossed records, which include notes from counseling sessions that contain details of patients' personal lives.

State will look into clinic

Friedmann — who served 10 years in prisons and jail after being convicted of assault with intent to commit murder, armed robbery and attempted aggravated robbery — said his only plans for the records are to turn them over to regulatory agencies.

Jill Hudson, a Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities spokeswoman, said the state is looking into the allegations.

She said methadone clinics are required to hold on to patient records for 10 years and they must be destroyed before they are thrown away.

Clinics that violate these practices face fines ranging from \$500 to \$5,000, Hudson said.

Also, a complaint against the methadone clinic has been filed with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights, which enforces patient privacy laws.

The civil rights office can't discuss complaints that are under investigation. But in general, once a complaint is filed the agency investigates, and if the complaint is founded, the agency will work with the provider to correct the problems. If the problems continue, the agency has the option to levy fines.

Friedmann said it's especially egregious that the clinic failed to protect patient privacy because there is no other methadone clinic in this area.

"Where else are they going to go?" Friedmann asked. "There is no other game in town."

The building that houses the Middle Tennessee Treatment Center is co-owned by Gus Puryear IV, the Corrections Corporation of America's general counsel and a federal judicial nominee.

Puryear has been accused by a former CCA employee of overseeing a practice that produced misleading reports about safety incidents at the company's prisons. The Private Corrections Institute has been an outspoken critic of Puryear's nomination.