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La Nueva Voz

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Pomona's only community newspaper!



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Was Sheraton-Fairplex COVID operation out of control?

Were doctors at now-closed COVID hotel profiting from the pandemic in Pomona with skimming, kickbacks?

By Jeff Schenkel
Publisher

Pomona's own "COVID hotel," the once-venerable Sheraton Fairplex Hotel, without fanfare or announcement closed its doors last week as an isolation and quarantine facility for COVID patients – a year to the day from the start date of a lease between Los Angeles County and Fairplex repurposing the 244-room landmark during the pandemic emergency.

Even before the stealth closing, unofficial reports from La Nueva Voz sources earlier this month were that e-mails already had been circulating around the county that the hotel operation was winding down, was no longer accepting new patients, and would be shutting down as a COVID facility as of March 31 after a deep cleaning of the facility, possibly because of reports of numerous irregularities and complaints from inside and outside of



Private security guards this month check credentials as a car pulls into the parking lot of Pomona's Sheraton Fairplex Hotel, now closed to the public, the largest COVID isolation and quarantine facility in Los Angeles County and apparently the largest in the country. The "temporary" guard shack has been at the entrance to the hotel for the past year.

the operation.

On deadline day for this issue, last Friday, the hotel for the first time in the last 12 months had been removed from the county's on-line list of "current medical sheltering locations," leaving only two out-of-the-area facilities in the system with a total of 75 clients – in a county with a population of 10.1 million and currently reporting 861 COVID hospitalizations. At the peak of the pandemic there were eight facilities in the system.

On reflection, of course, the past year – and COVID-19 itself – has caused the loss of lives, jobs, businesses, houses and more throughout Pomona, the United States, and the world.

There is no shortage of Americans in neighborhoods everywhere who are unable to pay their rent or their mortgage payment, lining up in food banks and unable to afford proper medical care.

But some, according to sources who have provided information to

La Nueva Voz, were actually profiting from the pandemic – and they were doing it big time, right here in Pomona, allegedly by taking unfair advantage of contracts with Los Angeles County, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the federal CARES Act (Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act), which was set up to provide economic assistance to get the country through the COVID-19

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emergency.

To put it in perspective, what does "big time" mean in this context?

For starters, sources have told La Nueva Voz they saw \$10 million in invoices for payroll for medical personnel at Pomona's Sheraton Fairplex Hotel, the largest COVID isolation and quarantine facility in Los Angeles County and apparently the largest in the country.

Then how far does \$10 million go for employees of a facility that at its peak housed 254 patients on Dec. 24 but this month had been averaging around 40?

Former employees – both county employees and outside contractor nurses – told La Nueva Voz they did the math on that \$10 million in invoices and it looked like the "outside" nurses were being paid about three times what county nurses – who last month were being paid out – were paid.

And that's three times the pay for the same work in the same hotel that county workers were performing only weeks before.



Eren Batayola, at left, and Anna Sessions, both Los Angeles County Department of Health Services registered nurses, discuss a patient while working in the lobby command center at Pomona's Sheraton Fairplex Hotel.

That's really three times with a lot left over and, when La Nueva Voz asked several of its confidential sources who provided information for last month's story what they thought about the \$10 million in invoices (Feb. 25 La Nueva Voz, available online under "Past Issues" at www.lanuevavoz.net), nobody was surprised.

Other sources this month have told La Nueva Voz there has been a lot of finger pointing as to where funding is going – a "registry" or employment agency for nurses operated by a friend of the boss or other vendors and suppliers handling "huge" contracts, and all without the usual county-mandated purchasing and inventory tracking procedures in place.

Last month's story focused, among other things, on how most of the employees allegedly were coming from the same registry. New information received from an anonymous source this month alleged that one agency had been over-billing, regularly charging for 16 hours a day, seven days a week for registry workers. There also were numerous allegations of kickbacks associated with these billing practices.

The same source alleged that the registry, Master Staffing, Inc., a skilled nursing



Dr. Heidi Behforouz



Dr. Kevin D. Burns

agency based in Glendale, was part of a larger company that management was using for "everything." After all, the Sheraton Fairplex, Pomona's "COVID hotel," for the past year closed to the public and sealed off by security officers because of the pandemic for exclusive use as a quarantine facility, allegedly provided operators with an easy environment in which to operate a little "fast and loose" without the county's usual checks and balances in place.

Skimming, kickbacks, under the table payments?

So, it came as no surprise – when La Nueva Voz was contacted after last month's issue featuring a story on the hotel was published – that a former nurse called and tossed words and allegations around like "skimming," "kickbacks" and "under the table" payments.

Then how high up did these allegations go? La Nueva Voz is looking closely at former medical director of the facility Dr. Kevin D. Burns, whose last day on the job reportedly was March 5. Apparently, he was removed from the position

because of an overwhelming number of complaints from staff, all right in the middle of a La Nueva Voz investigation for last month's story on activities at the hotel.

(It is still unclear whether Burns was terminated or reassigned to another Los Angeles County quarantine facility – there were four still in operation earlier this month.)

For one thing, one of the first things he did when he arrived on the job last September, sources told La Nueva Voz, was remove all documentation procedures for inventory tracking, purchasing of supplies, and even appropriate hiring practices required by Los Angeles County.

But based on additional allegations from anonymous sources, it began to appear that Dr. Heidi Behforouz herself may have been part of the scheme or at the very least was aware of it since, for example, she immediately asked subordinates in the early stages of the La Nueva Voz investigation how much "they" know and who was providing the newspaper its infor-

mation.

Behforouz, who oversees all of the county's COVID isolation facilities during the pandemic emergency, is medical director of the county's Housing for Health program, part of the county's Department of Health Services.

And then there's the part about how apparently the bulk of the services and supplies were being provided by the same parent company.

And there are allegations that Burns actually was being paid twice for his work at the hotel – once by the county and again by a registry where he was "on call" – a registry that brought doctors to the operation.

"It's (the money) not being used correctly," a former contract registered nurse at the hotel told La Nueva Voz.

Another registry, JWCH Institute, mentioned in last month's story, claims in its promotional materials that its mission is to improve the health status and well-being of underserved segments of the population of the Los Angeles area.

A new source this month alleged JWCH operators work regularly with Behforouz in other areas of her Housing for Health operation.

The source also alleged the owner of JWCH, a nurse practitioner and a friend of Behforouz, is married to an attorney who writes his wife's contracts and also works for Los Angeles County in an apparent conflict of interest.

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Los Angeles County Department of Health Services staff members prepare food, snacks and other essentials for delivery to patients isolating in the Sheraton Fairplex Hotel, used as a COVID-19 quarantine facility for the past year.

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Another source alleged Behforouz formerly worked at Martin Luther King, Jr., Medical Center's Recuperative Care Center for four years as medical director, where she eliminated all of the emergency medical technicians and replaced them with JWCH personnel.

One source questioned why additional contractors were not involved in the Pomona hotel operation, and why positions were not opened up to county staff before going to any outside agency.

Even hotel medical director Burns reportedly came in at three times the pay the previous director, a county employee, received.

County's chief nursing officer investigating Pomona hotel operation

La Nueva Voz learned from another source soon after publishing last month's issue that Sue Currin, R.N., chief nursing officer for the Department of Health Services, and a couple of levels above Behforouz on the department's organizational chart, had assigned an entire team of investigators to look into the operation of all of the quarantine facilities – including instructing investigators to make personal on-site visits and conduct reviews at the

Sheraton Fairplex Hotel.

Currin reports directly to Dr. Christina Ghaly, director of the county's Department of Health Services, the second largest health department in the country.

Currin's investigation reportedly got under way roughly 10 days after La Nueva Voz published its February issue enumerating the many irregularities reported by various sources to this newspaper.

La Nueva Voz, immediately upon learning she had ordered the review, e-mailed a detailed list of nine questions to Currin this month asking what she was learning and what she planned to do about it – ranging from employee complaints her team was investigating to Burns' actions in eliminating standard county controls and protections for purchasing, inventory tracking and hiring, and even to the allegations of "kickbacks" and "skimming."

Neither Currin nor the county's public information staff responded by deadline time for this issue (public information spokespersons said they don't comment on internal personnel or client matters).

Meanwhile, another continuing source of information for this on-going story alleged this month

that both Burns and Behforouz are under investigation by the Medical Board of California where they have an "open case." The board is charged with administration of the state's licensing and regulation of physicians and surgeons.

The source added the two also are being investigated by "other federal/state agencies."

Carlos Villatoro, the news media spokesman for the Medical Board of California, would not confirm or deny any activity, claiming investigations are confidential under California law, although any resulting disciplinary actions, judgments or other red flags eventually are posted on the board's public web site.

Similarly, Nicole Nishida, the news media spokesperson for the Los Angeles office of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration,

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Photos courtesy of Los Angeles County Medical assistant Seth Alvarez is on his way to disinfect after conducting a blood glucose check for a patient isolating at Pomona's Sheraton Fairplex Hotel.



Los Angeles County Internal Services Department employee Florida Hernandez sprays disinfectant in outdoor common areas where patients were allowed twice a day while staying at the Sheraton Fairplex Hotel for COVID quarantine purposes.

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asked about Burns and Behforouz, was unable to disclose whether her agency was investigating a medical practitioner because such a disclosure "would be compromising our case."

La Nueva Voz reached out to the DEA early this month following up on last month's story in which a variety of drugs allegedly were being used – officially and unofficially – by patients at the hotel.

Providing patients marijuana, alcohol to keep them from leaving

For example, as reported last month, sources told La Nueva Voz that nurses and other staff members were required to provide marijuana, "edibles," alcohol and "vapes" to patients at the hotel in order to discourage them from leaving against medical advice – and employees have been disciplined if they refused to comply.

Managers allegedly were attempting to "keep the numbers up" in the hotel in order to keep billings up, and these practices – among others – were reportedly prompting numerous employees to leave.

Then, as La Nueva Voz also reported last month, there was the issue of patients in the hotel allegedly ordering deliveries of "crystal meth," a popular party drug, from outside providers who delivered it in pizza boxes or sandwich bags to get past security.

Pomona police confirmed in a telephone conversation – after researching calls for service from the hotel at the request of La Nueva Voz – that they responded at least once to confiscate a quantity of the illegal drugs and store them as "found property," since they were unable to determine who delivered the drugs to the hotel and who the intended recipient had been for the order.

The cost of running the hotel as a COVID facility, which was being operated by Los Angeles County, is expected to be passed on to FEMA and funding under the CARES Act.

And those costs have been adding up quickly over the past year – the contract between Fairplex and the county for exclusive use of the hotel and all of its 244 rooms alone totals \$897,920 per month plus an additional \$89,792 per month to cover the City of Pomona's Transient Occupancy Tax.

And those invoices for payroll totaling \$10 million came to light this month in an after-hours interview

with a former night shift nurse at the hotel who said she and a colleague spotted the invoices in an office at the hotel while looking for supplies.

She reached out to La Nueva Voz after seeing last month's revelations in February's issue.

La Nueva Voz left voice mail messages on the personal cell phones of both Burns and Behforouz indicating in detail the direction this month's story was taking and giving them the opportunity to provide comments in response.

Neither returned the call by press time this month.

Both chatted briefly with this newspaper last month and comments from each were included in last month's issue, although Behforouz insisted at the time that all of the allegations were "unfounded."

La Nueva Voz also reached out this month to the county's joint emergency public information center, handling media inquiries during the COVID pandemic for the county's Department of Health Services, with four questions providing the county with an opportunity to respond on topics including clarification as to whether Burns was fired or reassigned, and a general inquiry asking if the county has reached out to any law enforcement or prosecutorial agencies asking them to investigate anything on a growing list of allegations.

"In response to your inquiry, Los Angeles County Health Services does not comment on internal personnel or client matters due to privacy laws," a spokesperson for the county's Department of Health Services' Office of Communications said in an official e-mail response.

'COVID hotel' an evolving story

This month's update on the "COVID hotel" story is the third month in the series. La Nueva Voz news sources have been an important part of the development of this story, and many of the sources involved have preferred to remain anonymous. La Nueva Voz has continued to respect their wishes.

And each month, readers with additional information have contacted La Nueva Voz, broadening the scope of this evolving story.

At this point, clearly, law enforcement agencies and agencies with subpoena power ultimately will be required to fully connect all the dots and determine who the suspects are and what criminal charges, if any,

will be appropriate.

The closest account with any similarity to activities in the Pomona hotel was discovered in a quick internet search in which the San Francisco Chronicle reported last May that San Francisco was providing methadone, alcohol and marijuana to some addicts and homeless patients isolating from COVID in hotels who were interested in beginning addiction treatment while under the Department of Public Health's supervision.

One former night nurse at the Pomona hotel told La Nueva Voz patients here in need of detoxification were referred to Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center.

As of deadline day for this month's issue, La Nueva Voz has confirmed that various allegations have been brought to the attention of and are being reviewed, to some extent, by agencies including the Pomona Police Department, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office, the California Attorney General's office, the FBI and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Pomona's Sheraton Fairplex Hotel was converted last March

to exclusive use by Los Angeles County as a COVID isolation facility for those exposed to COVID and in need of a place to quarantine or those who have contracted the disease but with only mild symptoms not requiring full hospitalization.

It has been used by first responders, members of the region's homeless population and others.

La Nueva Voz has been the only news media outlet to break this story and continue to cover it since January after receiving reports and documents from a medical worker at the hotel who first brought to light allegations of improprieties and mishandling of patients, in some cases moving them to other county quarantine facilities in the system to keep the census reporting up so "the numbers look very high and the funding keeps coming."

Anyone with any information regarding possible criminal violations or other information is encouraged to contact La Nueva Voz at (909) 629-2292, the law enforcement agency of your choice or, if you prefer to provide information anonymously, "Crime Stoppers" at (800) 222-TIPS (8477).