

OPINION

County needs to take action – and tell people about it – in wake of allegations of improprieties at Pomona’s ‘Covid hotel’

For the past three months, La Nueva Voz has been taking a close look at the goings on at Pomona’s Sheraton Fairplex Hotel, more commonly known in these pages as Pomona’s “Covid hotel,” since it was used for the past year as an isolation and quarantine facility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of those goings on were allegations reported to us by probably six or eight employees and former employees who worked at the facility – and the reports came from both the management level all the way down to the people who took patient temperature and blood pressure.

In January’s issue, we looked at the hotel operation after receiving reports that patients were being transferred around the county to artificially keep the numbers up in “census” reporting.

After that issue was published, we heard from others alleging that managers were requiring nurses to offer patients alcohol and marijuana to keep them from walking out against medical advice and, again, to keep numbers up in the hotel, as we reported in our February issue.

And the February issue prompted another former nurse at the facility to reach out to us with allega-

tions of kickbacks and “under the table” payments in what became a multi-million-dollar operation over the past year. That “follow the money” story was reported in our March issue.

(Miss one of these? Go to www.lanuevavoz.net and click on “past issues” to catch up on your reading.)

Now at La Nueva Voz, we pride ourselves on maintaining balance in our news columns, and we’ve been commended for that many times in the past. That interest in balance extended to what turned out to be a three-month series (we just didn’t know it was going to turn out that way at the time!).

But we also reserve the journalistic right as a newspaper to express our opinion from time to time, and we do that – as do newspapers everywhere – in editorial columns such as this one.

We feel strongly that in our three months of investigation – which brought us “up close and personal” with many front-line workers at all levels in the hotel – that we received an accurate picture of what was going on there – from the numbers, from our observations and from the comments, letters and e-mails from those who

worked there and directed the operation.

As a little background, that whole drug thing at the hotel – offering patients marijuana or patients “ordering in” crystal meth in pizza boxes (confirmed by the Pomona Police Department) – was unfortunate or, as a friend of La Nueva Voz at the Pomona Post Office put it, “shocking.”

Even so, that was really just symptomatic of all this.

Our biggest concern was with the way the money allegedly was handled. As our sources reported, the outside medical director came in and immediately removed all documentation procedures for inventory tracking, purchasing of supplies and even appropriate hiring practices required by Los Angeles County.

This, of course, paved the way for the alleged billing abuses, kickbacks and more.

That medical director was removed from his position in the middle of the La Nueva Voz investigation. But others above him are still working for the county.

And we still have no official reports as to what happened with the money – literally millions of dollars – that started with bill-

ings to Los Angeles County and that the county was passing on for reimbursement through U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency and federal CARES Act (Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act) payments.

The hotel shut down as a COVID facility last month, but the county can’t just let any confirmed financial abuses ride off into the sunset unnoticed in the bank accounts of doctors and administrators who were in charge.

Several investigations reportedly already are under way – including one by Sue Currin, R.N., chief nursing officer for the county’s Department of Health Services.

But the county Board of Supervisors needs to get involved – whether the subject at hand is in the category of “dirty laundry” or not – and make sure the issue is handled. And supervisors can’t just let the issue go away if Currin herself steps down in what new curiously timed reports indicate is an impending retirement.

If heads need to roll, then so be it. If the public integrity division of the county District Attorney’s Office needs a little push to take action, county supervisors need to be the ones to give them that push.

Some of this, of course, may be happening behind the scenes. But county public information officers have made it clear that they are not commenting on internal personnel

matters.

We’ve taken things as far as we can at this point. As we have reported, now it is time for authorities with subpoena power to step up to the plate, do a little digging beneath the surface and then go public with their findings.

Where fraudulent activity is discovered, county and federal dollars need to be recovered and criminal prosecution needs to be pursued as appropriate.

And when official action is taken – whether criminal or administrative – county officials must take a transparent approach and go public with their action through the news media.

Those of us who majored in journalism in college in the ‘60s were told that the public has the right to know and that still stands today, some 50 years later.

We’ve had calls from readers and talked to readers on the street who said they had “no idea” all this was going on at the hotel which, of course, has been closed to the public for the past year.

We’ve even had calls thanking us for the story and asking why Los Angeles media hasn’t done anything with this Pomona story.

But rest assured – when the county supervisors are able to take appropriate action on this and tell us about it, we’ll put the information where it belongs – right back up on the top of page one in Pomona’s only community newspaper.