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U.S. Senate launches investigation of Oregon homes for people with disabilities

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Sen. Ron Wyden.

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By Fedor Zarkhin | The Oregonian/OregonLive

The U.S. Senate has launched an investigation into a national corporation's homes for people with disabilities in response to a report in The Oregonian/OregonLive about substantiated abuse at one of the company's Oregon facilities.

The newsroom reported in January that Oregon regulators shuttered a Mentor Network home in Curry County following extensive evidence that a client had been severely neglected. State regulators found that managers repeatedly ignored caregivers' concerns about the disabled person's festering pressure wound, including that it smelled of "rotting flesh."

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“When vulnerable Americans are abused or even killed in the care of a taxpayer-funded care provider, that organization must be held accountable,” Sen. Ron Wyden, D.-Ore., the committee’s ranking member, said in a statement Tuesday.

The Senate’s Committee on Finance, chaired by Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, sent letters Tuesday to the Oregon and Iowa branches of the The Mentor Network, demanding copies of a raft of compliance records by month’s end. The company operates in 36 states, serving about 13,000 people in group homes and 19,000 in non-residential settings.

The director of Mentor Network’s local company, Mentor Oregon, confirmed she received a letter from the committee.

“We take our obligation to do all we can to ensure the health and well-being of those we serve extremely seriously,” Yvette Doan said in a written statement.

The U.S. Senate’s investigation comes on the heels of renewed oversight by state regulators who have been closely monitoring Mentor Oregon since finding problems in Curry County in late 2017. This marks the second attempt by the Department of Human Services to force Mentor Oregon to make its facilities safer for residents.

Three business days after the newsroom’s Jan. 10 report about the Curry County home, state officials took the rare step of ordering surprise inspections of all Mentor Oregon homes.

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Lilia Teninty, director of the state division responsible for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, said the review was prompted by the discovery of neglect at a Curry County group home in January. It’s the most aggressive step the agency has taken in her four and a half years at the agency against any company, she said.

Officials have since found systemic low-level violations at 15 of the company's 24 group homes. They are investigating a death at a Klamath County home that the department said could have been caused by neglect.

Alarmed by those findings, state regulators in February prohibited Mentor Oregon from accepting any new clients in its homes pending substantial improvements. The agency also suspended a Winston group home's license this month after discovering eight violations.

"There is reliable evidence of systemic abuse and neglect by Mentor Oregon," the agency wrote in a Feb. 15 letter to Doan.

The company had the most confirmed cases of abuse and neglect in 2018 of any company with homes for people with disabilities, according to data provided by the agency.

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Oregon previously prohibited all Mentor facilities from accepting new clients in November 2017 in response to problems identified at the home in Curry County. Regulators then lifted the sanctions piecemeal through December 2018, when the company agreed to shut down its home in the city of Brookings.

"We fully expected that the actions that we took should have resulted in improvements in quality of care, Teninty said of the year-long effort to improve conditions in Mentor homes.

Mentor told Oregon it had changed training practices and taken other steps to ensure clients were safe. Doan told the newsroom in December that the company "developed an extensive quality improvement plan," trained staff and worked closely with health officials to improve services.

Yet in January, just one month after closing the Brookings facility, regulators found more problems at a different home in Curry County.

A quadriplegic client had a bedsore and smelled "foul to the point of gagging," according to a report Mentor Oregon staff filed with officials at the time. Staff didn't bathe the person often enough because the home was short-staffed, the facility manager told officials, according to a state report.

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The group home's report to the state also said Mentor staff ignored a second resident for hours at a time, and allowed the person to stand in feces while staff washed the person down after using the bathroom.

Mentor Oregon now has one month to provide extensive documentation about its operations to the Senate committee. Grassley and Wyden have requested six years' of abuse reports and state investigations, the names and positions of staff, staff-to-client ratios in each facility and training records.

The Committee on Finance oversees the federal Medicaid program, which pays for the vast majority of people in group homes. Committee staff have had three conversations with Teninty in recent months to ask about state oversight, she said.

The committee demanded similar records from The Mentor Network's Iowa branch, citing reports that clients had been sexually abused.

This is the committee's second investigation involving The Mentor Network. The previous one examined the company's for-profit child foster care homes. Investigators found that children in the company's care died at a rate 42 percent higher than the national average.

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Have a tip about disability services in Oregon? Get in touch.

-- Fedor Zarkhin

fzarkhin@oregonian.com

desk: 503-294-7674|cell: 971-373-2905|**[@fedorzarkhin](https://twitter.com/fedorzarkhin)**

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