

Pitt County Nursing Home Rates as One of State's Worst  
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One Pitt County nursing home ranks among the worst in the state for health and safety deficiencies, according to the Division of Health Service Regulation's Nursing Home Licensure and Certification agency. A review of the county's six nursing facilities reveals that most are operating up to standards except for Greenville's Greenfield Place.

According to Medicare inspection results, Greenfield Place, located at 2575 W Fifth St., was cited as having 30 health deficiencies from June 1, 2007, to Aug. 31, 2008. The 130 bed facility's 30 deficiencies were the most in North Carolina for that period. The statewide average for health deficiencies is five while the national average is nine.

Becky Wertz, of the North Carolina Division of Health Service Regulation, says that because of the number of deficiencies, Greenfield Place has become a "special focus facility." As a result of being labeled a special focus facility, Greenfield Place will be subject to bi-annual inspections and the state quality improvement organization will be providing the nursing home with assistance indefinitely.

Three separate Greenfield Place employees declined to comment for this story, referring all requests to the head administrator, who was unavailable and off the premises. A message left for him seeking comment was not returned.

Of the 30 deficiencies listed in the report Wertz says that "some of them were at the 'jeopardy' level and some were at the 'harm' level."

Deficiencies at the jeopardy level meant that there was a "high likelihood of injury or death of a patient," and harm meant that there was actual harm to a patient as a result of the deficient practice, according to Wertz. She added that in one case a patient had to have a hand amputated.

"There were signs that the circulation was going bad," said Wertz, "and they failed to monitor it, and the patient ended up losing the whole hand."

The alarming inspection findings come on the heels of two lawsuits filed by families of Greenfield Place residents against the nursing home in the last six years in Pitt County Superior Court. Thomas H. Smith Jr. sued Greenfield Place on behalf of his deceased father, Thomas H. Smith Sr., who became a resident at Greenfield Place in October 2001. In court records, the younger Smith contends that his father, due to his physical and mental condition, was already predisposed for developing skin conditions that put him at risk for sepsis, an infection of the blood stream. The 2003 lawsuit contends that Greenfield Place employees failed to properly monitor and address Smith's condition. The plaintiff contends that as a result of the nursing home's failure to monitor the skin condition, the elder Smith developed skin ulcers that led to sepsis. The suit also contends that Greenfield Place employees failed to properly identify and treat the sepsis.

On Feb. 3, 2002, Smith was found unresponsive in his bed and was transported to Pitt County Memorial Hospital. Hospital staff informed Smith's family that his condition was grim and three days later Smith died. The plaintiffs contend that Smith's death was a result of negligent care by Greenfield Place. The case was settled out of court in June 2005.

Deanna Thorne, a legal assistant for the law office of Blanchard, Miller, Lewis & Styers, said that a confidentiality clause in the settlement restricts any details of the settlement from being released. Thorne did say that she had worked on the case and recognized it immediately when mentioned. She stated that oftentimes nursing homes will settle lawsuits to avoid long and expensive legal proceedings.

Greenfield Place was also sued in 2003 on behalf of an 86-year-old resident, Effie Chance. Chance fell from her wheelchair while being loaded into a transport van on a wheelchair lift on Nov. 7, 2000. The suit alleges that two Greenfield Place employees, Shawnte Suggs and Gina Freeman, who were also named as defendants, failed to properly secure and supervise Chance while she was on the lift. It alleges Suggs and Freeman failed to use restraints that were readily available, as well as failed to follow standard procedures set by Greenfield Place for patient transport. Greenfield Place did not deny those allegations in its response to the lawsuit's allegations.

It does admit that Chance received injuries as a result of the accident. Greenfield Place did deny, however, that Suggs and Freeman's negligence was the sole cause of Chance's injuries. Chance did not die as a direct result of her injuries, but the suit contends that her injuries left her in a weakened state, and she died in February 2002.

In a written statement filed with the lawsuit, Freeman stated in detail that she left her coworker, Suggs, with the elderly Chance as Freeman took another patient into a mental health center. In the statement, Freeman says she instructed her coworker to leave Chance out of the van with the wheels locked and not to try to load her into the van. Freeman states that she knew Suggs was not trained how to operate the wheelchair lift. Freeman then explains while she was inside with her patient she was told that a person had fallen.

"When I went outside . . . Mrs. Chance was laying on the ground," reads the statement. "She had falling [sic] off the lift of the van after Shawnte Suggs attempt to put her back in (the) van after I told her not too" [sic].

The Chance family settled out of court with Greenfield Place on Sept. 1, 2004. A message left for Richard Cannon with the law office of Cannon & Taylor, seeking details of the settlement, was not returned.

According to the North Carolina Department of Correction, Gina Freeman was convicted in Pitt County for misdemeanor driving with a suspended license in 1997. She received probation with a suspended sentence and is no longer on active probation.

Greenfield Place sits just off of Fifth Street near Pitt County Memorial Hospital. The sprawling wings of its main building appeared clean and free of hazard on a December visit to the facility. Employees were hanging decorations for the holidays and the sound of ringing phones and intercom pages filled the halls.

Yet, the nursing home was still found to have problems this fall. The state regulation agency's Wertz said that during the latest inspection on Oct. 2, two 'jeopardy' level, two 'harm' level, and eight other deficiencies were also discovered. "At that point, that's when we identified them to be a special focus facility," said Wertz. "They had harm level tags this summer and harm back in the winter."

A court ordered IRS tax lien was placed on Greenfield Place for \$11,462.84 in taxes owed for the year 2004. The tax was paid and the lien lifted on Aug. 2, 2005.

When asked how often problems as severe as Greenfield Place's are seen, Wertz said “a couple other facilities” in North Carolina have had similar records.

Greenfield Place may be particularly vulnerable to problems because, unlike the four other major nursing homes in Pitt County, it is privately owned and not part of a chain of homes under single ownership, said Wertz.

Wertz said that in many circumstances, homes with jeopardy surveys get the assistance of corporate staff from the parent company as well as additional assistance from sister facilities. The additional staffing helps put processes in place to turn a problem home around.

Four other nursing homes in Pitt County house multiple residents. The fifth, Cypress Glen, is a church-owned retirement community listing only one resident and four beds.

Tar River Manor has the second highest number of health deficiencies in Pitt County with 10 as of August 2008. Heritage Healthcare of Farmville had eight deficiencies, Golden Living Center had four, and Britthaven of Ayden had two. None of these facilities had “jeopardy” or “harm” level deficiencies, however.

Liz Ham contributed to the reporting of this story.