

Former prison health care contractor failed to pay \$6M in bills, ambulance services say

By NATHAN CLARK
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LANSING, MI – Ambulance service providers across Michigan are demanding the state make it right after, they say, a former state contractor failed to pay \$6 million for services provided.

Wellpath, previously contracted by the Michigan Department of Corrections to provide health care for prisoners, did not pay the ambulance service providers from 2023 to April 2024, the Michigan Association of Ambulance Services announced Wednesday, Aug. 28.

“Michigan EMS providers deliver essential healthcare services to all residents in need, including those in Michigan prisons,” said Angela Madden, ambulance service association executive director. “Wellpath’s actions have caused financial hardship for several Michigan EMS agencies, making it more difficult to pay for staffing and operations that are essential to our communities.”

The contract with the state ended in April and emergency medical services agencies, working in partnership with Wellpath, have not been reimbursed, according to the association.

Wellpath did not respond to requests for comment.

Michigan Department of Corrections Public Information Officer Jenni Riehle confirmed the contract with Wellpath ended in April. The department currently contracts with a new company, VitalCore. She did not comment further regarding the \$6 million claim.

MDOC entered into the contract with Wellpath, headquartered in Tennessee, in August 2023 paying the provider about \$111 million a year to take care of all state prisoner health care and pharmaceutical needs, according to the contract.

Covering the cost of ambulance services was included in the agreement. Wellpath, working in conjunction with Grand Prairie Healthcare Services, notified MDOC it no longer wished to provide services to MDOC and agreed to transfer its contract to VitalCore, according to the updated contract.

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It is unclear if VitalCore, based in Kansas, is now responsible for picking up the bill for unpaid ambulance services. An effort to reach VitalCore for comment was unsuccessful.

Under Michigan law, EMS agencies are required to respond to 911 requests including calls to Michigan's prisons. At least 15 EMS providers serviced the state's prisons, the association said.

"Michigan EMS providers are asking the legislature to reimburse us for our work so that it does not impact the care we provide to our local communities," said Jeff White, chief of Richmond Lenox EMS in Macomb County. "At a time when EMS remains underfunded nationwide, this is a hit we simply cannot afford."

Huron Valley Ambulance, which covers the Washtenaw County area, is owed \$430,000 in unpaid EMS charges for its response to several MDOC facilities within its coverage area, said Emergent Health Partners spokesperson Marc Breckenridge.

State Rep. Jaime Greene, R-Richmond, is calling for a supplemental budget to reimburse the providers.

"This is absolutely outrageous," Greene said. "Our EMS providers put their lives on the line every day to ensure that all patients, including those incarcerated in our prisons, receive the emergency care they need. Now, they're being told they won't be paid for the services they provided. It's time for the Legislature to step in and right this wrong."

Greene said she is also calling on the Michigan Attorney General's Office and the Michigan Auditor General to investigate Wellpath and the Michigan Department of Corrections.

Michigan is home to 29,253 EMS providers, 798 life support agencies and 3,998 licensed life support vehicles, according to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Division of EMS and Trauma within the Bureau of Emergency Preparedness, EMS and Systems of Care.