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Lawmaker divests nursing home stake

State senator sheds interest in troubled care facility

By Gary Marx and David Jackson, Tribune reporters

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State Sen. Heather Steans has divested her ownership stake in a troubled southwest suburban nursing home that has faced repeated citations for serious patient neglect, including medical failures that allegedly contributed to two patients' deaths.

The December death of Cordelia Lee at Evergreen Health Care Center in Evergreen Park and another death of a 90-year-old patient last year are part of a pattern of substandard care that moved state health authorities earlier this month to revoke the facility's license.

Evergreen continues to operate as it contests the revocation before an administrative law judge.

Steans had no operational role in Evergreen, and the Chicago Democrat said that, following a Tribune report on the facility earlier this month, she shed her 2.8 percent interest in the home.

Steans added that she has reviewed her tax returns for the last five years and determined that she has taken no income from her stake in two companies that operate the home.

But the new revelations about the deaths and repeated safety infractions could cloud Steans' reputation as a reformer. She recently spearheaded legislation to improve safety and care standards at nursing homes statewide.

"Frankly, it's shocking that somebody who has been an advocate for nursing home reform has an ownership in a home that has a repeated background of citations," said attorney Steven Levin, whose firm last week filed a lawsuit against Evergreen on behalf of the Lee family.

Steans' interest in the nursing home stems from investments by her father, financier Harrison Steans, the former chairman of LaSalle National Bank. Steans said she donated to a family foundation her interest in the facility — as well as a 4 percent interest in a related nursing home management firm. Once the foundation assigns a dollar value to those shares, it will make a donation of that amount to charities that serve senior citizens, she said.

"Nobody has suggested that as a result of my minor interest in a nursing home that I was ever deferential

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to the industry. The opposite is true," Steans said. "I have been the most vocal advocate for nursing home reform and high standards in the state.

"Now that these allegations have come to light, I have divested my interest, not only because I want to avoid even the appearance of a conflict, but because if there is any truth to the charges then the operation of the home has been inconsistent with my values."

Steans and Evergreen administrators said the facility has moved aggressively to take corrective action, including replacing top management. Her father and other family members retain a roughly 15 percent interest in Evergreen, she said.

State inspectors have found medication errors at the facility, including an instance in March when Evergreen mixed up the medication regimens of two patients and gave one of them a series of drugs — including insulin, which "could be potentially life-threatening if not monitored," a state report said.

Another state report from June 2009 said three patients didn't get their pain medications, including a 54-year-old woman with malignant breast cancer. Suffering "excruciating pain," the woman was found on the edge of her bed crying, yelling and screaming, a state report said.

Former postal clerk and homemaker Cordelia Lee, 83, was admitted to Evergreen in December after a hospital diagnosed blood clots in her legs. Lee had been living alone in her South Side home since her husband died a decade earlier, enjoying biographies her son would bring her from the library.

"She was very sharp. She could debate and present her point of view — she would let you know what was on her mind," said her son Anthony Lee, a schoolteacher.

Cordelia Lee was prescribed the powerful anti-coagulant medicine Coumadin, which needs to be closely monitored through frequent blood testing. But Evergreen allegedly missed doses, failed to keep a log charting her medications and didn't inform her doctor that her blood test results were abnormal and indicated danger, according to state inspection reports and the family's recent lawsuit.

Lee began to have stomach pains and was sent to the emergency room, where she was diagnosed with Coumadin toxicity and bleeding in her lower abdominal cavity. She died the next day, Dec. 9, according to the lawsuit and state inspection reports.

Anthony Lee said he frequently visited his mother at Evergreen and questioned the nurses as she vacillated between periods of lucidity and stupors in which she couldn't hear his voice.

"I knew it had to be the medications," he said. "I told them that things weren't right."

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