

# Nearly half of Boulder Valley Women's Health Center staff leaves, citing leadership

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Six former employees of the [Boulder Valley Women's Health Center](#) have issued a scathing letter assailing its leadership, and alleging a culture of “discrimination and bigotry” that is an unsafe, disrespectful and untrustworthy environment for staff and patients.

The letter states that in a nonprofit organization of approximately 40 employees, nearly 20 have left within the last four months, those departures coming at positions that include clinic and patient services assistants, directors and supervisors, counselors, educators and organizational support staff.

Lisa Radelet, communications director for the center, said it was 17 departures from a staff of 42.

“The toxic work culture at Women's Health is not a new phenomenon, but has escalated over the past few months,” the letter claims. “Women's Health promotes ‘a work environment for all employees that is affirming and respectful.’ However, many current and former staff members are overwhelmed with trauma because of their treatment while employed with Women's Health. Staff were routinely and unapologetically misgendered by leadership and the very clinicians who claim to provide trans-inclusive care.

“Racist and classist microaggressions, such as inappropriate comments about appearance and behaviors, were also directed towards employees.”

One of those who signed the letter is Cassidy Winchip, an Arvada resident who resigned in May after three years at the center, which has locations in both Boulder and Longmont. She quit Aug. 16.

“I resigned because I saw systematic discrimination and oppression of both staff and patients over long periods of time,” said Winchip, who worked as a patient advocate

and recently also had trained as an abortion counselor as well as a gender support counselor for transgender patients.

“I just reached my breaking point that particular day. My threshold was reached, and I resigned, effective immediately.”

Winchip placed the responsibility for the situation described in the letter on the center’s executive director and CEO, Susan Buchanan, as well as its board of directors.

“She has been there for 18 years, and people in positions of power want to stay in power,” Winchip said. “In two instances, outside consultants had been hired at a great financial price. Our hopes were up, and once the reports came out their recommendations were completely ignored, and then it was business as usual.”

She said that leadership has been particularly insensitive around issues relating to understanding and respect around gender identification.

“If you can’t provide that safe space for your own employees, you can’t provide that to patients, either,” Winchip said. “Trans-identifying or non-binary employees ended up resigning due to discrimination.”

## **‘Constructive change’**

Buchanan acknowledged Tuesday morning having seen the letter, and later in the day, the center released a statement in her name.

“There is no doubt that in the present moment, our clinics are experiencing great challenges, not only with pressures all health care organizations are facing, but also with threats particular to providing the full range of reproductive health care options, including abortion and quality care for transgender and non-binary members of our community,” the statement read.

“We’ve heard the concerns of former staffers who feel change is needed and we have launched efforts that we believe will result in constructive change. Through all of this, we have never compromised our mission nor turned away from our singular focus on compassionate, ethical, and high-quality health care for the people we serve.”

The Boulder Valley Women’s Health Center, founded in 1973, was the first abortion clinic in Colorado. It also provides birth control, pregnancy tests and counseling, annual exams, cancer screening and screenings for sexually transmitted infections.

[Its 2018 annual report shows](#) that in that year, it treated 4,153 patients, 3,062 for family planning/gynecology, 870 teens for those same services, 385 for abortion care and 132 for transgender and gender non-binary services.

Of those, 56% were below the federal poverty line. Ninety-three percent of the patients were female, 3% male, and 4% identified as trans/nonbinary. White and not Latinx comprised 65%, 22% were Hispanic or Latinx, and 1% were African American.

In the annual report, it states that “Women’s Health serves people of all gender and sexual identities. We seek to be a welcoming and safe place. We are committed to using correct names and pronouns and to respect all aspects of a patient’s identity.”

The report notes that in 2018, 132 patients were seen for hormone therapy out of a total 147 patients who identified as transgender or nonbinary.

Mardi Moore, executive director of Out Boulder County, did not want to comment on the contents of the letter.

She did, however, say “Boulder Valley Women’s Health is a great community partner of Out Boulder County’s. We regularly refer transgender and nonbinary people to their gender clinic, and the work that they’re doing at their gender clinic isn’t being done anywhere else in Boulder County.”

## **‘A lot of them are in pain’**

Another woman who signed the letter was Kathleen Melendy, who resigned her position a patient services assistant on Aug. 8. She said many issues had arisen during a four-month sabbatical taken this year by Buchanan, during which board member Ruth Becker had taken Buchanan’s position on an interim basis. Becker has since returned to the board of directors.

“It almost seems to not really matter who is in that position, because I believe the whole heirarchical system in place is one of the major problems,” Melendy said. “I think it’s contrary to what the organization is supposed to be about, and the people we were supposed to serve.

“I really believe that people on the front lines interacting with patients should be the ones that are involved in the decision-making process.”

Melendy said none of the six women who signed the letter of protest identify as transgender. However, she said, every trans/non-binary person at Women’s Health since she started there a year ago had left as of mid-August.

Kerigan Flynn of Longmont resigned as a patient services assistant the same day as Melendy, part of a mass resignation of seven to nine employees, Flynn said. She and Melendy both said that action came after a letter was presented by employees to a board of directors meeting on July 15, and received what they described as an unsatisfactory response. She also signed the protest letter.

“I care about what the clinic represents, I care about what it tries to provide, or claims to try to provide, more accurately,” said Flynn, who said her health has improved since leaving. “But it would take a huge shift in leadership in order for it to be a healthy workplace.

“I know the people who are working there and couldn’t leave for a multitude of reasons, and I care about them and I know that a lot of them are in pain and getting a lot of work piled on top of them. That’s going to affect patient care it already was, when I was on my way out.”