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## Lawmakers hear testimony about Planned Parenthood conditions

By James Dawson

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Two former nurses who worked at Planned Parenthood of Delaware's (PPDE) Wilmington office testified before state lawmakers Wednesday about unsafe and unsanitary practices they witnessed in 2012.

The informal hearing comes the same day the state Department of Health and Social Services released a letter outlining concerns about sterile equipment and expired supplies.

The nurses, Joyce Vaskonis and Jayne Mitchell-Werbrich, gave detailed testimony on potentially contaminated procedure rooms, unsterile medical equipment and untrained staff for about an hour.

Vasikonis worked at the facility for ten months. She says the fact that the state doesn't perform routine inspections and that clinic accreditation is handled within Planned Parenthood is unacceptable.

"How can you say whether you are doing it right or wrong when if you say that you're doing it wrong it may impact on your bottom line and how much money you make. I was shocked to find that out. That was just incredible," Vasikonis said.

The group of ten legislators, mostly Republicans, occasionally shook their heads and grimaced at certain details.

"Unbelievable sums it up," said Senate Minority Whip Greg Lavelle (R-Sharples), who co-hosted the hearing.

Following the hearing, the Delaware Divisions of Public Health and Professional Regulation released a joint statement on their investigations into conditions at Planned Parenthood. They detailed a pair of "unannounced investigations/surveys" of the Wilmington clinic in the past year.

"The first investigation was completed in August 2012 as a result of a complaint. The agencies could not substantiate claims against the Wilmington clinic of PPDE or its medical personnel," according to the statement.

"A second joint agency investigation occurred this spring following reports of patients being treated in emergency rooms following procedures at Planned Parenthood. [the Division of Public Health] identified practices related to facilities and equipment that needed to be corrected. In response, PPDE developed a corrective action plan, which has been approved by DPH."

The statement added that the second investigation also found evidence of unprofessional conduct by a Planned Parenthood of Delaware physician. That doctor voluntarily surrendered his Delaware medical license and is no longer employed by PPDE. The Division of Professional Regulation says it has also forwarded all relevant

information to the Attorney General's Office for possible disciplinary action before the Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline.

DHSS says staff will conduct future unannounced inspections to ensure further compliance with health regulations.

Lavelle called the state's response to the claims, "A little light and a little late."

Senator Robert Venables (D-Laurel) was the other co-host of Wednesday's hearing. Venables says a bill he wrote two years ago forcing the state to regulate abortion clinics could've prevented this.

"I'm hoping that maybe now that some of the other legislators that thought maybe my legislation was too stringent and trusted Planned Parenthood to do what they should've been doing will realize that you can't trust them and that we're going to have to put something in [to regulate abortion clinics]," said Venables.

Planned Parenthood of Delaware CEO Ruth Lytle-Barnaby defended her organization and its response to DHSS findings.

"The findings of the recent survey were immediately rectified. While it is important to adhere to every medical regulation, the Division of Public Health findings do not in any way support the allegations of former employees who are now working with organizations whose mission is to oppose our services," said Lytle-Barnaby in a statement.

Lytle-Barnaby emphasized Planned Parenthood of Delaware continues to operate as usual.

"For those of you who may have heard speculation and falsehoods about our services in recent months, I want to provide clear information. Our doors have always remained open, we are providing our full range of services, and all of our staff are highly trained and meeting our promise of quality care," Lytle-Barnaby said in her statement.

