

# Union protests hospital job changes in TV ads

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By Steve PeoplesJournal State House Bureau

PROVIDENCE — It may have taken place 400 miles away, but the Walter Reed Hospital scandal plays a leading role in a political advertisement that hits Ocean State television sets today.

A powerful state employees union has spent more than \$10,000 on an advertising campaign that blasts Governor Carcieri's plan to privatize housekeeping and food service at the state-run Eleanor Slater Hospital. The move would save the state \$5.4 million, according to the governor's office, by replacing an estimated 180 union workers with private employees.

The 30-second ads feature bedside nurses treating elderly patients, while a narrator urges viewers "to contact their legislators to prevent a faceless out-of-state for-profit company from coming in and creating another Walter Reed scandal here in Rhode Island."

Revelations of poor outpatient conditions and bureaucratic delays at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., led to the recent resignations of several top military officers.

The first television commercials will air today on various cable stations, including ESPN, NESN, CNN, MSNBC, Lifetime, and The Weather Channel, according to Dennis Grilli, executive director of Council 94, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which represents more than 8,000 Rhode Island employees. The commercials are to debut on local network stations later in the week.

"We feel that privatization is very offensive to us, and we're going to do whatever we have to do to fend it off," Grilli said, noting that this is the first television ad campaign his union has financed. "It's not only dangerous for us, we believe it adversely affects the patients and the veterans."

The governor's office sharply criticized the union for referencing Walter Reed Army Medical Center in the ads.

"I think that was unconscionable that they would link what happened at Walter Reed to our hospitals," Carcieri spokesman Michael Maynard said. "The Walter Reed scandal had absolutely nothing to do with food service."

Union critics are joined by hospital residents who strongly oppose the plan to privatize hospital staff at both the Zambarano unit and the other Slater campus in Cranston. Disabled patients traveled to the State House late last month to protest the governor's plan, arguing that savings are exaggerated and patient care would suffer.

Opponents included longtime Zambarano resident Frank Beazley, who said no outside firm could replace the care and personal touch that food and housekeeping workers now provide.

“We would never do anything in privatization that would sacrifice quality of service and food,” Maynard said.

The television commercials represent the union’s first, and most polite, effort to change the governor’s policy, Grilli said. “We’re just trying to educate the population,” he said. “We really haven’t tried to slam anybody in this — it doesn’t mention the governor’s name — but we’re prepared to go further if we have to.”

The ads open with the image of a nurse taking an elderly man’s blood pressure as a tender female voice, supported by a gentle piano melody, says: “At the Rhode Island Veterans home and Eleanor Slater hospital, our most frail and elderly citizens, including our veterans, are receiving top-notch care from concerned and hard-working public employees. Unfortunately, the jobs of these dedicated public employees are now in jeopardy, and the quality care they provide along with it. Call your legislators today.”

The screen then flashes to a photo of a building bearing the name, “Walter Reed General Hospital,” as large red words appear: “No to Privatization.”

Maynard accused Council 94 of playing on irrational public fears by suggesting nurses would be eliminated under the governor’s plan. “I thought it was totally ingenuous to show pictures of nurses and aides,” he said. “The union leadership has been drilling fear into [the public].”

Grilli denied allegations that the commercials were intentionally misleading.

“They were representative of nurses, but in the second shot, there was a female feeding the patient — which would be dietary. I don’t think it was exaggerated. Certainly, jobs are going to be lost and that’s all we’re trying to point out,” he said.

The General Assembly ultimately will vote on the governor’s proposal.

A spokesman for Steven M. Costantino, D-Providence, head of the House Finance Committee, said it was too soon to say whether the plan would survive legislative scrutiny, as state leaders struggle to close an estimated \$360-million budget deficit for this fiscal year and the next.

“They’ve listened to all the testimony on the issue and no decisions have been made,” House spokesman Larry Berman said. “The issue of privatization will be determined by how much money is available.”

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