

Labor complaints at Whittier Street Health Center

By [Jessica Bartlett](#) – Reporter, Boston Business Journal
Jul 13, 2009, 6:22am EDT

Nearly a year after a divisive unionization campaign at Whittier Street Health Center, management and workers are set to face off again on Monday, this time over several alleged labor violations workers say they have faced while trying to negotiate a contract.

The two groups are set to meet at a hearing on June 17 at the National Labor Relations Board, where an administrative law judge will review several complaints filed by the union from September through February. The union alleges that the health center has used threats, discipline and firing to discourage union activities.

Whittier also filed its own complaint against the union in October and December, but earlier this year they were dismissed.

The two sides have clashed ever since the doctors and nurses at Whittier Street unionized with 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East in June 2018, becoming the first and only community health center in the state with unionized professional staff.

[Filaine Deronnette](#), vice president of health systems for 1199 SEIU, said Whittier workers have faced a number of challenges. "Services had been cut, employees (were) laid off, and we're in the midst of bargaining our first contract," she said.

The union's complaints include that the health center reassigned employees to different departments; announced that when a union employee leaves they will be replaced by non-union employees; implemented new requirements that discourage employees from engaging in union activities; "interrogated" employees about union activities during a work meeting in November; and disciplined an employee to "discourage employees from engaging in (union) activities."

A spokesperson for Whittier CEO Frederica Williams said the center won't comment on any pending legal cases or any personnel matters, but said bargaining over a union contract is ongoing. "The Whittier Street Health Center Bargaining Committee has been meeting consistently with the union bargaining team, and continues to negotiate in good faith," a statement from the health center said.

The complaint also alleges that an undisclosed number of employees were let go because of their union activities. In an interview, Deronnette said that six employees were laid off in total — 10 percent of the unionized staff — because of work associated with the union.

[Ragan McNeely](#), a therapist at the Roxbury community health center for a decade, was one of the providers dismissed after the unionization. He said he had been actively involved in the union activities when he was fired in October, leaving approximately 100 patients without a therapist.

"All of a sudden we had a terrible problem and had to let go of people overnight. It was done in an incredibly sloppy and malicious way with no capacity to care for the patients left behind," McNeely said. "(Whittier administrators) claim everyone was reassigned. But no one got phone calls. It was done strictly to intimidate people, with no regard for our patients."

The turmoil over the past year began when, a week before the unionization vote in June 2018, Williams announced the organization would let go of 20 doctors, nurses and administrative staff to help make up a \$1.2 million financial shortfall. Those cuts sparked protests and prompted the city mayor's office to get involved. Whittier ultimately reversed the cuts days later.

The June 2018 vote unionized the 76 professional employees at the Roxbury community health center, which cares for 30,000 patients from Roxbury, the South End, Dorchester, Mattapan, and Jamaica Plain. Since the vote, the union members say they've met with administrators approximately a dozen times.

"Our workers are committed to a good contract," Deronnette said. "Every opportunity for them to be at the bargaining table and speak at the bargaining table and propose things that make a difference for them is one we've made every attempt to make fruitful. But over our heads is the fact that there are these charges."