

Whittier Street signs \$232K settlement with union over alleged labor violations

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Whittier Street Health Center will pay \$232,500 to three former employees to settle allegations of anti-union activity after a lengthy fight between unionized employees and management.

The settlement agreement, signed mid-July, addresses complaints that union local 1199SEIU filed with the National Labor Relations Board, [which alleged that the health center has used threats](#), discipline and firing to discourage union activities since staff unionized at the Roxbury health center in June 2018. As part of the settlement, Whittier, which saw \$28.4 million in revenue in fiscal 2018, agreed to pay nearly a quarter of a million dollars within 21 days to three employees — [William Dian](#), [John Jewett](#) and [Ragan McNeely](#) — who had all been allegedly fired over their involvement in the union.

Whittier — which is the only health center in the state to have unionized professional staff — did not admit wrongdoing as part of the settlement. Neither an attorney nor a spokesperson representing the health center returned calls requesting comment.

Whittier will also rescind disciplinary actions aimed at Jewett and [Brenna Cyr](#), who had been active in the union, will modify employer rules that prohibited solicitation on company property, and will rescind disciplinary guidelines tied to productivity, the settlement said.

In addition to internal changes, Whittier will also be required to email and publicly post a notice to all employees informing them of the settlement.

“This is the result of working hard to reach an agreement,” said [Filaine Deronnette](#), vice president of health systems for 1199SEIU. “What we hope is, decisions made in the past will not continue to be made, and we will now work on an agreement that will highlight and make clear what workers rights look like at Whittier.”

The settlement underscores the strength of health care unions like 1199SEIU in the state, which have [added dozens of new members](#) and [negotiated new contracts](#) around the state.

Under the terms of the agreement, the three physicians who had been dismissed from Whittier will not return to their jobs. McNeely, who received a \$75,000 settlement, said that part of the agreement was difficult to accept, but that the physicians were concerned that pressing the case with the National Labor Relations Board could take years to resolve. “(We) felt strongly we needed to move on and 1199 needed to do the work of reinvigorating the few people who were left,” McNeely said. “There was nothing left for us to return to.”

Jewett, who received a \$112,000 as part of the settlement, said he hopes the settlement will improve working conditions at the health center, even if he isn't allowed to return. "Whittier has promised as part of the settlement to respect staff rights and obey labor law," Jewett said. "If that happens, it won't only improve the work environment but (also the) patient-care environment, and that's why we decided to form a union in the first place."

Working without a deal

The settlement brings to a close a tenuous year at the health center, which turned tumultuous after a divisive unionization campaign in June 2018. A week before the unionization vote, Williams, the CEO, announced the organization would let go 20 doctors, nurses and administrative staff to help make up a \$1.2 million financial shortfall. [Those cuts sparked protests and prompted the Boston mayor's office to get involved. Whittier ultimately reversed the cuts days later.](#)

The June 2018 vote unionized 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 met with administrators approximately a dozen times, but discussions fizzled out as alleged labor violations mounted.

The clinical staff is still working without a contract. Deronnette said the sides have already re-engaged in union negotiations following the settlement, meeting in the days following the settlement and with sessions scheduled weekly.

"I believe we can now focus on a strong contract that is fair to workers, creates processes that we can at least say we agree to and lend itself to an 1199 future at Whittier," Deronnette said. "That's what I see. We can all focus into our negotiations."