

Hospital staff removed from duties following Dawson death



Sean Rossman, Democrat staff writer 9:45 p.m. EST January 11, 2016



(Photo: Sean Rossman/Democrat)

Three medical professionals at the Calhoun Liberty Hospital were removed from their normal duties on Monday after showing a "lack of compassion" in the handling of 57-year-old Barbara Dawson last month.

Ruth Attaway, administrator and CEO of Calhoun Liberty Hospital, placed one person on unpaid administrative leave and removed two others from patient care until the hospital completes its own investigation of Dawson's death. Attaway announced the decision at a Monday news conference at the hospital, where she and the Rev. R.B. Holmes, of Tallahassee, named eight people to a hospital task force.

Attaway said she made the decision after seeing dash-cam video of Dawson's arrest in the early morning hours of Dec. 21. Dawson, who had been discharged from the hospital earlier that morning, told hospital staff and a Blountstown Police Department officer she was having trouble breathing. After more than an hour of arguing with police and medical staff and then collapsing outside a police car, Dawson died of a blood clot in her lung.

Almost immediately, many observers, including the NAACP, cried foul, claiming the hospital and the BPD mishandled Dawson's treatment. Some remain skeptical as to whether her race played a role in her death. A day after she died, her family hired Tallahassee law firm Parks & Crump and state Rep. Darryl Rouson, a St. Petersburg attorney and former local NAACP president.

Attaway did not provide the names of the three employees, but said the doctor who treated Dawson was not among them.

So far, Attaway's decision is the first and only punitive action taken against individuals as a result of Dawson's death. BPD, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration all have launched investigations.

"The first thing that struck me was a lack of compassion and that cuts to the heart," Attaway said, "because health care, compassion, patient care, this is what we're about. We're about saving lives. We don't want to lose anybody."

Attaway chose not to elaborate on what parts of the tape she was referencing, but said "because of that, we do need to make some changes."

The hospital's review of the incident, she said, will focus on three areas: Ensuring a standard of care; professional behavior and courtesy and compassion.

"I do not want to get past this. I don't want to forget Ms. Dawson," she said. "I want that to be in my heart and it make a difference in every action that we have here at this hospital, something that will change us from where we are to where we will be better."

Holmes and Attaway also named the task force they formed after Dawson's death to find best practice recommendations for the hospital. The panel includes hospital administrators, doctors, community leaders, a pastor and a pharmacist. Dr. John Fogarty, dean of Florida State University's College of Medicine is a member as well as Doris Ballard Ferguson, retired associate dean of Florida A&M University's nursing program.

The panel will hold its first meeting Jan. 28 and will develop a list of recommendations within 90 days. After the news conference, the task force, Holmes, Attaway and Dawson's niece toured the hospital.

Holmes, pastor of Tallahassee's Bethel Missionary Baptist Church and local president of the National Action Network, hopes the task force can build community support, lead to improvements at the hospital and maybe "become a model for other hospitals across the state of Florida."

Task force member Kenneth Speights, a Calhoun County School Board member and director of social services at River Valley Rehabilitation Center, said he's "looking for great things so that events of this nature never happen again."

Contact Sean Rossman at srossman@tallahassee.com (<mailto:srossman@tallahassee.com>) or follow [@SeanRossman](https://twitter.com/SeanRossman) (<https://twitter.com/SeanRossman>) on Twitter.

Calhoun Liberty Hospital Task Force

- Dr. Murray Baker, emergency room director, Jackson County Hospital
- Dr. Doris Ballard-Ferguson, retired associate dean, Florida A&M University's nursing program
- Dr. John Fogarty, M.D., dean of Florida State University College of Medicine
- Reverend Angus Jackson, pastor of St. Paul AME Church in Blountstown
- Dr. Esias Lee, M.D., Neighborhood Medical Center
- Mark Plummer, retired Liberty County pharmacist
- Kenneth Speights, chairman of the Calhoun County School Board and director of social services at River Valley Rehabilitation Center
- Dr. Cyneetha Strong, M.D., practicing family physician; president, Williams Gunn Medical Association; past president, Florida Academy of Family Physicians