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Bankruptcy hearing leaves hospital's fate unclear

- By BILL LODGE AND MICHELLE MILLHOLLON
- Advocate Capitol News Bureau
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The future of a Plaquemine hospital was uncertain Monday amid efforts to force the medical center into involuntary bankruptcy.

River West Medical Center's chief executive officer, Bryan Bogle, told local television reporters that he was fired Monday and that everything but the emergency room would close. He did not return the calls of The Advocate.

State Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary Alan Levine said Monday night he is trying to determine whether the hospital can operate solely as an emergency room.

He said he is concerned about the livelihoods of 200 employees and their families.

"I certainly understand the business climate is difficult, but I can't understate my disappointment in how Shiloh (Health Services) has managed this entire situation," Levine said in an e-mail. "They have left the community in a very difficult situation."

River West is owned by Shiloh Health Services.

The hospital bounced 65 paychecks totaling \$100,000 in late January, prompting the state, Iberville Parish and other creditors to attempt to force the facility into bankruptcy proceedings.

Several of River West's creditors said in their bankruptcy petition that the hospital's debts totaled more than \$500,000, including \$418,639 that DHH described as Medicaid benefits overpayments.

But attorneys for River West told U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Douglas D. Dodd on Monday the hospital is owed more than \$5.1 million by Levine's Department of Health and Hospitals, called DHH.

Gary K. McKenzie, a Baton Rouge attorney for DHH and several other creditors, said he could not

comment on the case Monday.

Civil suit records from December show River West settled a claim of approximately \$100,000 from patient-rehabilitation-services contractor TherEX Inc. The terms of that settlement are not specified in the court record.

But in January, approximately \$100,000 in River West payroll checks bounced.

River West attorneys told Dodd, though, the hospital has more than enough funds to cover payroll checks issued Friday. The attorneys said those funds totaled \$206,525.

Bradley L. Drell, an Alexandria attorney representing River West, said that money was held by both River West and its general partner, Shiloh Health Services of Louisiana Inc.

After Monday's hearing, Drell said the judge decided to postpone a decision on how to proceed with the bankruptcy case until after a March 20 hearing.

Until then, Drell said, the hospital's emergency room will remain open. He said River West officials will decide what other services may have to be reduced.

No trustee has been assigned to the case, Drell noted. But the judge imposed a restriction on management and owners.

"They can't make any transfer (of assets) to insiders without court approval," Drell said.

"I have a feeling the hospital will continue," Drell said. "It's just a matter of how and who."

Shiloh officials refused to comment after meeting with hospital management Monday. They said more information would be released Thursday.

Iberville Parish President J. Mitchell Ourso Jr. said the parish, which was owed "less than \$1,000," took the lead in seeking to force the hospital into involuntary bankruptcy in an effort to save it from closure.

"We had to make a move as quick as we could to get this thing halted so could save this hospital," Ourso said. "That's why the parish got behind this lawsuit, to try to save this for the community. We took the bull by the horns. The parish took the lead and the state and DHH joined in with us. The parish hired a bankruptcy attorney.

"It is essential that the parish government do what we can to try to save this hospital from total extinction," Ourso said.

He said the community hospital is important to the health and welfare of parish citizens who otherwise might be delayed in getting help if forced to fight traffic getting to hospitals across the river in Baton Rouge. It also employs 250 people, he noted.

Greg Garland of The Advocate's Westside Bureau contributed to this report.

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