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EDITOR'S PICK

Roswell Park vows new transparency after release of 'troubling' secret report on diversity

Stephen T. Watson

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Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center's board of directors hired a law firm in spring 2021 to investigate how the hospital handles discrimination complaints made by employees.

The lawyers from Cozen O'Connor didn't stop there.



Report found 'significant and pervasive' diversity issues at Roswell Park

The document, marked “confidential” throughout, is blunt:

Roswell Park has “significant and pervasive” problems with racial discrimination.

Employees feel hospital leadership isn’t committed to promoting diversity and inclusion.

The complaint reporting system is garbled, and employees lack confidence that administrators will aggressively pursue their claims – or that offenders will face serious consequences.



Leecia Eve, center, the chair of Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center’s Board of Directors, speaks Thursday to The Buffalo News’ editorial board. She is addressing the hospital’s hiring of Crystal Rodriguez-Dabney, left, as senior vice president and chief diversity officer.

Laurel DiBrog, senior vice president and chief marketing and communication officer, is on the right.

These findings about the state of diversity at Roswell Park were kept secret from April 2022, when the firm completed its work, until Thursday, when officials released the report.

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“In my opinion, withholding the investigation report was unfortunate because it delayed the healing and renewal that the community desperately needs,” said Steve Weiss, who resigned his Roswell Park board seat last year. “I am hopeful that Roswell Park will embrace the changes needed to reach its full potential.”

In response, hospital leaders said they have made significant progress in improving how discrimination complaints are addressed.

They also said the hiring of a new chief diversity officer is just one example of Roswell Park’s sharper focus on improving the culture at the 125-year-old Buffalo institution.



Roswell Park spending up to \$500,000 on PR firm focused on diversity, equity and inclusion

“And that greater focus is going to be coupled with an unprecedented – with an unprecedented – level of transparency and accountability,” Board Chair Leecia Eve told The Buffalo News.

Here are more takeaways from, and reactions to, the 43-page report.

Why now?

It is not clear why the hospital changed course after arguing for months that the Cozen O'Connor report was a privileged legal communication.

Roswell Park's board of directors voted behind closed doors during a special board meeting Thursday to release the report.



Roswell Park hired a firm to investigate allegations of racism. It's kept the findings secret

“One small step for Roswell. A giant leap for DEI,” Dr. Greg Daniel, a board member, said Friday, referring to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Asked why this vote was held in executive session, Eve said, “No particular reason.”

She also declined to elaborate on the board’s reversal.

Weiss said he believes Gov. Kathy Hochul played a decisive role.

“I knew Gov. Hochul would cause the report to be released once she was fully briefed on the gravity of its contents,” he said.



Hochul accepts resignation of Roswell Park board chair after racism claims against his company

Hochul named Eve to replace the former board chair, Michael Joseph, who resigned under pressure in May.

“Gov. Hochul is grateful to Chair Leecia Eve and the board of directors for voting to release this critical document, and will continue working with Roswell to ensure the institution lives up to the highest ethical standards,” Hochul spokesman Matt Janiszewski said Friday.

Dr. Mary Bassett, an ex-officio board member during her tenure as state health commissioner, said Roswell Park waited too long, but she’s glad the report is finally public.

“The report is troubling, as I think anybody who reads it will discover. And it should be read,” Bassett said.

Discrimination claims

The investigators interviewed 14 people, some more than once, and collected numerous claims of bullying, micro-aggressions and other harassment directed at women and employees of color.

An employee of color reported being stopped and questioned as to whether he worked for Roswell Park. Others reported references to Black employees as “animals.”

And a Black anesthesiology technologist, spotted putting on gloves, was asked, “You can put those gloves on faster than that, can’t you, O.J.?”



Dr. Anne Grand'Maison, who worked at Roswell Park from 2016 to 2022 as a medical oncologist trained in sarcoma, filed a lawsuit early this year against the cancer center and several of its top leaders, claiming that she was forced out after she raised concerns about patient safety and gender discrimination.

Libby March

The claims of discrimination rarely led to discipline, according to employees interviewed for the report.

For example, when a white nurse told a Black nurse that George Floyd deserved to die, a nurse-supervisor simply told the white nurse to “knock it off.”

“The report is also entirely consistent with our complaint, which describes a long history of discrimination by Roswell Park, senior leadership’s lack of commitment to confront it and retaliation against those who speak up about it,” said Laura Edidin, an attorney representing Dr. Anne Grand'Maison in a discrimination lawsuit filed against the hospital. Roswell Park denies Grand'Maison’s claims.

Racial, power dynamics

Most of Roswell Park's physicians and senior leadership are white and male – as is the case at many cancer hospitals.

Of 200 Roswell Park physicians who identify their race, five are Black and four are Latino, numbers the institution said align with national data for practicing oncologists.

The most diverse area of the hospital's workforce is the group of employees who clean the facility, Roswell Park constituents told the investigators.

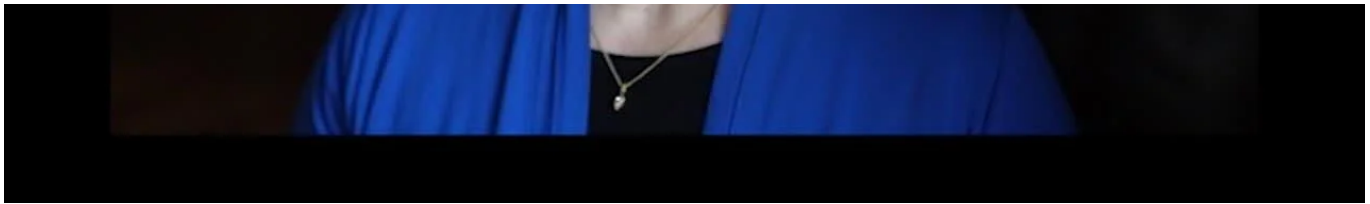
Many workers said they often felt their complaints went unheard, especially if they were directed at a higher-ranking physician.

“Employees are hesitant to report physician misconduct because of a paralyzing power dynamic between doctors and other employees,” one interview subject said, adding that this isn't unique to Roswell Park.

The lack of diversity makes it even harder to bring doctors and nurses of color to Roswell Park, officials conceded to the report's authors.

Interviewees also pointed out Roswell Park is based on the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, but the workforce doesn't reflect the diversity of the surrounding, largely Black community.





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Black doctors' frustration

The few Black doctors at Roswell Park reported enduring mistreatment despite their higher status at the hospital, with one describing “a persistent ‘hostility’ toward minority physicians.”

Others said they were marginalized, undermined or underpaid compared to white colleagues.

The report refers to a Black physician who rose to the hospital’s second-highest position. The name is redacted, but this was Dr. Kunle Odunsi, who left in 2020 to run a cancer hospital in Chicago.

Odunsi isn’t quoted directly in the report. However, he spoke to another official about the disrespect he felt when, as deputy director, he was forced to sit with support staff during board meetings because he didn’t have a seat at the main table.

Roswell Park CEO Candace Johnson – her name, too, is redacted, but her identity is clear from the context of the description of a conversation – told Cozen O’Connor that Odunsi never shared his concerns with her before his departure.

Odunsi did not respond Friday to a message seeking comment.

Several interviewees said Odunsi’s departure and the litigation brought by Dr. Willie Underwood III, a nationally prominent urologist, cast a shadow over the institution. Underwood received \$4 million from the hospital to settle his lawsuit.

Recommendations, response

The report called for wholesale changes to how Roswell Park handles discrimination complaints.

The lawyers wrote that the system in place – at least at the time – then was confusing, failed to properly document discrimination claims, too quickly shifted those complaints to a mediated response, limited communication and rarely provided meaningful information to the complainant once the investigation was complete.

“We ultimately recommend hiring a trained investigator whose sole responsibility is to receive and investigate discrimination-related reports,” the authors wrote, an investigator who should serve as chief diversity officer.


More fundamentally, the report states, Roswell Park must address the perception – despite past, well-intentioned efforts – that it doesn’t prioritize diversity.

Eve, the board chair, said Roswell Park is doing that, notably by hiring Crystal Rodriguez-Dabney as senior vice president and chief diversity officer with a mandate and budget to effect change.

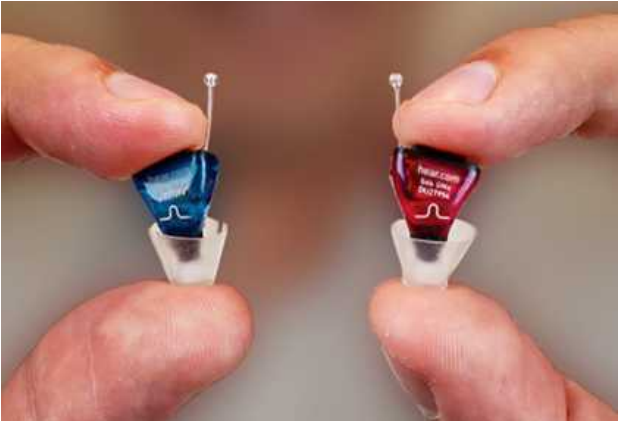
Eve and Rodriguez-Dabney said the report reflects the views of a small portion of the hospital’s nearly 4,000 workers, and every institution must confront these issues.

“This was an organization that was brave enough to say, ‘What can we do better? Where have we gone wrong?’ ” Rodriguez-Dabney said. “And I challenge other organizations locally to do the same. To look at their own biases, to look at their own policies and procedures, and make and take proactive measures to change those things.”

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