**Wisconsin hospitals sued patients during a public health emergency. Two are now dismissing some suits.**

*by Bram Sable-Smith, WisconsinWatch.org*

Two Wisconsin hospitals that filed medical debt lawsuits against dozens of patients during the coronavirus pandemic are dismissing some of those lawsuits.

A Wisconsin Watch/WPR analysis published Wednesday found that Wisconsin hospitals sued at least 104 patients over medical debt in small claims court since March 12, when Gov. Tony Evers declared a public health emergency to fight the virus. Froedtert Memorial Lutheran Hospital Inc. in Milwaukee filed 46 of those cases.

A Froedtert spokesperson told Wisconsin Watch and WPR on Tuesday that Froedtert had “suspended filing small claims suits” as of March 18 in response to COVID-19. But online court records at the time showed 18 small claims suits filed on the hospital’s behalf since then, including 15 filed on Tuesday.

By Friday morning, all 18 of those cases were dismissed. The spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment for this story.

Among the lawsuits still open as of Monday: an effort to collect $7,500 from Blanche Jordan, a 39-year-old caregiver at an assisted living center outside of Milwaukee. WPR and Wisconsin Watch previously reported that Jordan, a breast cancer survivor with a compromised immune system, was served court papers at her duplex on March 29, days into Evers’ “Safer at Home” order that restricted “non-essential” business operations. Froedtert filed that lawsuit on March 17, and Jordan is scheduled to appear in court on May 28.

Green Bay-based Bellin Health Systems Inc. filed 11 lawsuits after Evers declared the public health emergency.

Jim Dietsche, Bellin Health’s chief operating officer and chief financial officer, said Thursday that the system “ceased all legal action” on debt collection on March 18.

The Wisconsin Watch/WPR analysis showed Bellin Health filed nine lawsuits after March 18, but Dietsche called the filings unintentional. Bellin’s Health’s debt collection system had already begun processing the actions before March 18, and the cases “weren’t pulled back,” he said.

“That was an error, and we apologize for that,” Dietsche said in an interview, adding that the nine cases “have been dismissed and those communications have been sent.”

Dietsche said he did not know when the health system discovered the mistake.

The Milwaukee Small Claims Commissioner Court dismissed one of those cases on Thursday, records show. Eight other Bellin Health cases filed after March 18 remained “open” as of Monday morning, according to online records.

Dietsche said Bellin Health was pausing, but not dismissing, cases filed before March 18. He said he did not know how long the pause would last.

“This is a very intense situation, and we’re trying to keep our patients and community in mind.”

The legal moves by Froedtert and Bellin Health come as other health systems vow to pause debt collection during the coronavirus pandemic. Spokespeople from UW Health, Marshfield Clinic, Gundersen Health System, Aspirus Grand View Health System and Froedtert South all told WPR and Wisconsin Watch earlier this week that they were pausing small claims suits.

SSM Health, which owns hospitals and clinics across Wisconsin, is “in the process of evaluating our policies,” spokeswoman Kim Sveum said in an email. “SSM Health is first and foremost attending to the needs of our patients and community in response to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.”

After the analysis published Wednesday, Wisconsin Watch and WPR found that Dean Health Systems Inc., which is owned by SSM, filed 43 small claims suits against patients after Evers declared a public health emergency.

Sveum noted that most were filed before Evers closed schools and issued his March 24 Safer at Home order. SSM Health is “working to pause many cases,” Sveum said, but she did not offer specific details. As of Monday morning, 37 of the 43 cases remained “open,” according to online court records. In five lawsuits filed March 16, courts granted a request by the health system’s attorney to delay proceedings until June due to the pandemic.

Evers signed an emergency order temporarily banning evictions and foreclosures on March 27. When asked on a press call Friday whether Evers would consider taking similar actions on medical debt collection, Ryan Nilsestuen, his chief legal counsel, said Evers’ office was looking into it.

“There is a fairly significant difference between debt collection and an eviction ban,” Nilsestien said. Evicting somebody from their home “runs completely contrary” to public health guidelines to stay at home, Nilsestuen added. Medical debt collection is “significantly different.”

More than a quarter of U.S. adults said they or someone they know faced trouble paying a medical bill, according to a 2016 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the New York Times. Consumer advocates and investigative journalists have increasingly scrutinized hospital debt collection, prompting some U.S. hospitals — even before the pandemic — to stop suing patients to collect debt.

*This story comes from a partnership of Wisconsin Watch and Wisconsin Public Radio. Bram Sable-Smith is WPR’s Mike Simonson Memorial Investigative Fellow embedded in the Wisconsin Watch newsroom. Wisconsin Watch is a nonprofit, nonpartisan investigative reporting organization that focuses on government integrity and quality of life issues in Wisconsin.*