

Editorial: Nevada is wrong in busing mentally ill to California

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Nevada state mental health officials acknowledge that they bought bus ticket tickets for at least 99 psychiatric patients and sent them to California since last July.

They acknowledge one mistake, sending James Flavy Coy Brown, a 48-year-old man who had been housed in Rawson-Neal Psychiatric Hospital in Las Vegas, on a bus to Sacramento with a three-day supply of the antipsychotic medication thorazine and a few bottles of Ensure.

For the rest, they suggest, the practice is humane. They say their intent is to try to reunite mentally ill people with their family and friends. They say they're adhering to the wishes of patients who want to leave Nevada for California.

In reality, they are abdicating their responsibility to care for vulnerable people. They are engaging in Greyhound therapy and they are dumping patients on California.

In a hearing in Carson City last week, Nevada health officials acknowledge sending 99 patients to California. That doesn't count patients they may have sent to other states. Given California's experience, authorities in Arizona, Utah and other neighboring states ought to be aware of Nevada's proclivities.

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg called on U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to investigate Nevada's dumping of James Brown. Now that Nevada

admits busing 98 other human beings to California, Sebelius should expand her inquiry.

To understand the magnitude of what Nevada admitted, consider that a top mental health official in Arizona told the Bee in an email that she could not recall any instance in which that state had bused a psychiatric patient to California.

And in a recent six-month period, Oregon returned only one psychiatric patient to California, said a spokeswoman for the Oregon state hospital. That individual's family paid transportation costs, indicating that the person had a place to sleep upon his or her arrival back home.

As the Nevada division of mental health policy states, "it shall be the policy ... to assist patients who may be transported back to their home community in order to provide more appropriate care and to remove the burden of treatment from the state of Nevada."

Most mental health care workers view their work as a calling and an honor. The Silver State, by contrasts, believes it is important to remove the "burden of treatment" by cutting funding for mental health care and busing seriously mentally ill individuals out state.

Nevada officials seek to justify their use of Greyhound buses by claiming they have a large number of transients. No doubt that is true. But California attracts far more wandering souls than does Nevada.

To be sure, there have been outrageous instances of patient dumping in California. But mental health officials here find virtually no instances in which they bus patients to other states. When they do, their policy is to make sure that someone is at the other end to meet and care for the individual.

Nevada authorities cite patient privacy laws to support their

claim that they can provide no details about how the individuals fare once they arrive in California. Our guess is that Nevada authorities have no clue what becomes of the individuals they place on buses.