

Medical Board of California's Physician Diversion Program

While Making Recent Improvements, Inconsistent Monitoring of Participants and Inadequate Oversight of Its Service Providers Continue to Hamper Its Ability to Protect the Public

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State and Consumer Services Agency's response as of December 2007

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee requested the Bureau of State Audits review the effectiveness and efficiency of the Medical Board of California's (medical board) Physician Diversion Program (diversion program). In our review, we found that although the diversion program had made many improvements since the release of the November 2005 report of an independent reviewer, known as the enforcement monitor, there were still some areas in which the program needed to improve in order to adequately protect the public. For instance, although case managers appeared to be contacting participants on a regular basis and participants generally appeared to be attending group meetings and completing the required amount of drug tests, the diversion program did not adequately ensure that it received required monitoring reports from its participants' treatment providers and work-site monitors.

In addition, although the diversion program had reduced the amount of time it takes to admit new participants into the program and begin drug testing, it did not always respond to potential relapses in a timely and adequate manner. Specifically, the diversion program did not always require a physician to immediately stop practicing medicine after testing positive for alcohol or a nonprescribed or prohibited drug. Further, of the drug tests scheduled in June and October 2006, 26 percent were not performed as randomly scheduled. Additionally, the diversion program did not have an effective process for reconciling its scheduled drug tests with the actual drug tests performed and did not formally evaluate its collectors, group facilitators, and diversion evaluation committee members to determine whether they were meeting program standards. Finally, the medical board, which is charged with overseeing the diversion program, had not provided consistently effective oversight.

Medical Board's Action: Discontinued the diversion program.

In July 2007 the medical board met and determined that it would allow the diversion program to sunset on June 30, 2008. Due to the termination of the program, the medical board did not address individual audit report recommendations in its responses to the audit. Rather, the medical board described its transition plan, which was approved by the board in November 2007. Key components of the plan are outlined on the following pages:

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review of the Medical Board of California's (medical board) Physician Diversion Program (diversion program) revealed the following:

- » *Case managers are contacting participants on a regular basis and participants appear to be attending group meetings and completing drug tests, as required.*
- » *The diversion program does not adequately ensure that it receives required monitoring reports from its participants' treatment providers and work-site monitors.*
- » *The diversion program has reduced the amount of time it takes to bring new participants into the program and begin drug testing, but the timeliness of testing falls short of its goal.*
- » *The diversion program has not always required a physician to immediately stop practicing medicine after testing positive for alcohol or a nonprescribed or prohibited drug, thus putting the public's safety at risk.*
- » *Twenty-six percent of drug tests in June and October 2006 were not performed as randomly scheduled.*
- » *The diversion program's current process for reconciling its scheduled drug tests with the actual drug tests performed needs to be improved.*

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- » *The diversion program has not been formally evaluating its collectors, group facilitators, and diversion committee members to determine how well they are meeting program standards.*
- » *The medical board has not provided consistently effective oversight of the diversion program.*

Self-referred participants:

- The diversion program will no longer admit new, self-referred physicians into the program.
- Self-referred participants with three years of sobriety will be referred to a Diversion Evaluation Committee (DEC) for a determination of whether the individuals can be deemed to have completed the program.
- On June 30, 2008, self-referred participants with less than three years of sobriety will be sent a letter stating that the diversion program is inoperative and encouraging the physicians to find another monitoring or treatment program.

Board-referred participants:

- The medical board will notify individuals seeking admission into the diversion program in lieu of disciplinary action (board-referred) that the program will be inoperative June 30, 2008, and, at that time the medical board will refer the individuals to the Attorney General's Office and enforcement for further action. Being made fully aware of this condition, participants will be given the choice of entering the program or proceeding through the enforcement process.
- Current, board-referred participants with three years of sobriety will be referred to a DEC for a determination of whether the individuals can be deemed to have completed the program.
- On January 1, 2008, board-referred participants with less than three years of sobriety will be sent a letter stating that the diversion program will be inoperative as of June 30, 2008, and that they must find another program that meets the protocols of the diversion program. In addition, the other program must be willing to report to the Medical Board's chief of enforcement on a regular basis and to immediately notify the board of any positive drug tests.

Board-ordered participants:

- The medical board will no longer approve a stipulation that requires participation in the diversion program as a condition of a disciplinary order or issuance of a probationary license.
- On July 1, 2008, the diversion program condition in all disciplinary orders will become null and void and will no longer be considered a condition of probation. However, individuals will still be required to abstain from drugs and alcohol and must submit to drug testing. Staff will continue to monitor the random drug tests of these individuals.

Out-of-state participants:

Staff will continue to liaison with programs in other states to ensure that out-of-state participants comply with that respective state's program until completion.

