

TESTIMONY OF STACI ALBRITTON MITCHELL, MAYOR
CITY OF WEST MONROE, LOUISIANA

BEFORE THE

U.S. SENATE

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE

**HEARING ON “EXAMINING THE BANKRUPTCY OF STEWARD HEALTHCARE:
HOW MANAGEMENT DECISIONS HAVE IMPACTED PATIENT CARE”**

SEPTEMBER 12, 2024

Good morning, Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and members of the Senate Health, Education and Pensions Committee.

My name is Staci Albritton Mitchell, and I am the Mayor of the City of West Monroe, Louisiana. While I never expected to testify before Congress in my lifetime, I feel that what my community has experienced over the last year is worth your attention. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to testify on the impacts the Steward Health System has had on the City and the greater region.

For background, the City of West Monroe is located in northeast Louisiana and has a population of 13,000. This region is home to almost 300,000 residents. West Monroe is the home of Glenwood Regional Medical Center, which is managed by Steward and serves as the primary health access point for the residents of West Monroe, as well as Ouachita parish and 8 other surrounding Parishes. Glenwood accepts transfers from 26 rural hospitals in Northeast Louisiana. Glenwood was originally established in the 1960s. It was purchased by Steward Health in 2017 and has been under Steward’s management since then.

I mentioned before that Glenwood is a primary access point for almost 300,000 people, many of whom have been put at risk in the last year because of Steward’s management. During Steward’s management of Glenwood access to crucial emergency care became greatly diminished and at times unavailable, creating a strain on other healthcare facilities in the region. When Glenwood was put into “Immediate Jeopardy” status in December 2023 patients seeking emergency room services had to be diverted to facilities located across the river, up to 10 to 20 minutes further, such as Saint Francis Medical Center or Ochsner Hospital, quickly leading to severe overcrowding at these other facilities. There are reports of individuals having to wait hours and even days to receive services.

Further, even with the ER open, these self-inflicted service reductions led some people to a lack of overall trust in the community for the care provided by Glenwood. Some Northeast Louisiana residents are choosing to seek services further away, enduring increased travel and expenses in a rural, impoverished region, which further stresses other hospitals.

While patient care is the priority, Glenwood is also an important economic driver. Glenwood is the largest employer in the City of West Monroe and West Ouachita Parish. Before Steward's service reductions there were over 1200 employees at Glenwood. Today there are approximately 750 employees.

I can't overstate what a closure of Glenwood would do to these employees and their families. Those who work maintenance, janitorial and clerical type jobs will be affected the most because of the lack of those types of jobs in the region. The medical professionals would likely need to relocate to find new employment, which would worsen an already dire shortage of these professionals in the area.

In addition to the effects on its direct employees, Steward has either not paid or delayed paying local vendors. As an example, last November I was contacted by a local landscaping company asking for assistance dealing with Steward on an unpaid invoice. The business owner was contracted with Steward to provide landscaping services and had been faithfully fulfilling his duties under the contract. Steward, on the other hand, failed for several months to provide any payment for these services. I was provided the unfulfilled invoice for \$72,000. While the invoice was eventually paid, a rural small business with employees and dependent families can be forced to shut down for an unpaid invoice of that size.

I want to be clear that the caring employees of Glenwood have held the hospital together under extremely challenging conditions. Glenwood employees should be commended for their dedication to their patients and our community. This situation continues to cause mental, emotional and physical stress on these employees not knowing if they are going to have a job tomorrow.

West Monroe welcomes and encourages outside investment into our community. Accessibility to good health care is imperative for a region to prosper. Steward's management of Glenwood is having a negative effect on our efforts to attract new business, industry and residents to our region.

It is imperative that when individuals or companies invest in critical infrastructure, such as health systems, that they do so in a responsible manner with the health and wellbeing of all who are dependent on services in mind. In Steward's case, there was a failure to uphold this responsibility, and the various ramifications of that failure are easily seen within West Monroe and the other communities across the nation that were impacted by Steward hospitals. I want to ensure that other communities don't have to go through this.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's hearing and am happy to answer any questions you may have.