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Belhaven mayor wraps march to DC to save hospital, Teams With Moral Monday Protest

By Emery P. Dalesio

RALEIGH (AP) - A North Carolina mayor fighting for the hospital that closed in his rural North Carolina town finished his protest march to the nation's capital.

Belhaven Mayor Adam O'Neal was planning to complete his march Aug. 1 in Washington, D.C. The 45-year-old registered Republican started his two-week, 300-mile march to protest the closing of Vidant Pungo Hospital in Belhaven on July 1.

Getting the hospital chain Vidant Health System to reverse the closing is "one of the things that keeps driving me north and hoping for some justice - the mere idea that a non-profit - a non-profit - whose mission is health care in northeastern North Carolina" will reconsider, O'Neal said as he walked along a busy commuter highway in the northern Virginia suburbs.

Greenville-based Vidant agreed in April to operate the hospital until July and provide \$1 million if local officials would provide an additional \$2 million. A Vidant executive said the town wasn't ready as of June to take over the hospital.

"After multiple attempts throughout the 90-day extension to contact the town of Belhaven to help coordinate plans for assuming hospital operations, the lack of response made it apparent that the town knew that it did not have a plan to take over hospital operations," Vidant Community Hospitals President Roger Robertson said the day before the closure.

Vidant Health officials said in September they would close the hospital in May, in part because North Carolina lawmakers refused federal funding to expand Medicaid that would pay bills of poor patients. Vidant CEO Dr. David Herman said the hospital had provided more than \$2 million in unpaid health care since 2011, when Vidant took it over.

"The condition of the 60-plus-year-old building, changes in new health care regulations and declining patient volumes led us to move our plans to change the model of health care in Belhaven to better meet the needs of the community," Robertson said in a statement.

About half of all states have refused to expand Medicaid under President Barack Obama's health care law, adding to the pressure on hospitals. But the problem of maintaining rural hospitals, which tend to operate on narrower margins, has existed for decades.



President Barack Obama meets with National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice and Tony Blinken, Deputy National Security Advisor, in the Oval Office, Aug. 1. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Thousands Rally in Asheville for Moral Monday

ASHEVILLE - Two days after the North Carolina House of Representatives passed another regressive budget, thousands of people from the mountains and across North Carolina rallied in Asheville Aug. 4 to raise their voices at the second Mountain Moral Monday against the legislature's continued refusal to govern for the good of the whole.

The Forward Together Moral Movement took its Moral March to the Polls to the mountains to mobilize voters in the western reaches of the state. Throughout the afternoon, Moral Freedom Summer organizers and other volunteers moved through the crowd, registering voters.

The people turned out, fired up and ready to go. Thousands gathered in downtown Asheville, carrying signs, wearing T-shirts, waving flags and carrying clipboards with voter registration forms.

"This is no mere hyperventilation - know this is a fight for the future and soul of our state!" said Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II, president of the North Carolina NAACP. "It doesn't matter what the critics call us. They deride us and deflect because they can't debate on the issues. They can't make their case on moral and constitutional grounds. We stand here today - a quilt of many colors, faiths, and creeds. We stand united in our full color against our state government's current attack on the most vulnerable. We stand together to lift up the most sacred principles of our democracy."

Speaker Thom Tillis, Senate Leader Phil Berger and their allies thought that passing a budget with a marginal teacher raise would pacify the Moral Movement, but it didn't seem to have fooled the mountain folk. With each speaker - young and old, black and white alike - the crowd roared, cheered and chanted their support.

"There is not a lot of difference between civil rights activism and progressive mountain populism," Dr. Barber told the crowd. "We all believe in justice, fair play, treating people right and using political power to better society. These principles are rooted in our deepest moral virtues."

One young mother decried the state legislature's continued attempts to demonize and marginalize low-wage workers.

"As we mothers try to make ends meet, we are met with public disdain for being poor," Ewart said. "This is leaving us not just disenfranchised, but disenfranchised. But we are far from hopeless. We raise our voices today to say that our elected officials have a responsibility to us."

Barry Summers from Water Victory spoke against the state's attempts to wrest control over water from the people and give it instead to corporations.

"Water is not a source of profit," he told the crowd, "or a means to balance your budget after you have cut taxes for the wealthy."

Whatever the policy issue, the speakers continued to stress the urgency of voting this November. "We teach our students to stand up to bullies," Buncombe Co. teacher Lindsay Furst said. "Public education should not have a party line. We must vote out those who play politics with our students' futures. In November, step into a voting booth to stand up for the children of North Carolina."

At the rally outset, the organizers recognized the six mountain counties that started new NAACP branches last year - Haywood, Yancey/Mitchell, Transylvania, Watauga and Jackson Counties. As Dr. Barber put it, the Forward Together Movement is winning the fight for the public consciousness. And the work is just beginning.

"The costs are too high if we don't address systemic racism and poverty; it costs us our soul as a state," Dr. Barber said. "Every time we fail to educate a child on the front side of life, it costs us on the back side - financially and morally. Every time we deny living wages, leaving whole communities impoverished, it costs us on the back side. Every time we fail to provide health care on the front side of life, it costs us on the back side. Every time we attempt to suppress the right the vote, it tears at the heart of our democracy and the necessary foundations to establish justice. This is why we can't turn back."

Researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill studied the economic impact of 140 rural hospitals across the country that closed during the 1990s. They found that within a few years the community's unemployment rate was about 1.6 percentage points higher and the per capita income fell by more than \$700.

Beaufort County's unemployment rate was 8 percent in May, compared to 6.4 percent for the entire state.

O'Neal said the fight for the hospital could determine the economic future of a community surrounded by rivers and sounds.

"Not only have they taken emergency room services away from our town, they're also taking every industry we've got away - which is retirees moving into our area. They're not going to move to an area without a hospital," O'Neal said.

O'Neal said he and North Carolina NAACP President Rev. William Barber met Monday with members of the state's congressional delegation.

The NAACP has filed a complaint with Holder's agency, which helped facilitate the agreement that kept the hospital open until this month, seeking an investigation into whether the hospital's closing violates the Civil Rights Act.

O'Neal met last week in Richmond, Virginia, with Gov. Terry McAuliffe. Neither Virginia nor North Carolina has expanded Medicaid under the federal health insurance overhaul law, something McAuliffe favors and O'Neal blames for his local hospital closing.

Meanwhile, the mayor said he's ready to complete his mission.

"Everybody's got blisters, even my mother driving the car" supporting his march, O'Neal said. "But thanks to moleskin, I think I'll be fine."



Durham Charms hold Original "Mad Hatters" Luncheon. See pictures on page 7.

Durham assistant police chief sues city

(AP) - Durham Assistant Police Chief Winslow Forbes is suing the city and Police Chief Jose Lopez, alleging civil rights violations.

Forbes' lawsuit says he was passed over for promotion because of complaints he had made about discrimination in the department.

The lawsuit also accuses Lopez and city officials disregarded Forbes' right to be free from illegal race discrimination in the workplace.

Lopez said he could not talk about the lawsuit. City Attorney Patrick Baker also said he could not talk about the lawsuit.

"We'll respond to the allegations and look forward to defending the city in this matter," Baker said.

The suit comes after a discrimination complaint Forbes filed with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission last August. That complaint charged discrimination on the basis of race.

After the federal investigation, the Justice Department indicated earlier this year it would not pursue the case itself.

The lawsuit says Lopez promoted a white lieutenant to captain over a black female lieutenant who was at the top of the rating list for promotion.

The lawsuit also says Forbes was passed over for promotion to a deputy chief position at least twice, including at least once where he was the top-rated candidate.

Forbes' suit requests a jury trial and asks that the defendants be assessed punitive damages "exceeding \$10,000," and his attorney's fees and other costs.

The city has 30 days to respond to the lawsuit.

Man who shot NYC choke video held on gun charge

NEW YORK (AP) - The man who recorded video of a fatal police chokehold in New York City has been arrested on gun charges, police said Sunday.

Police said 22-year-old Ramsey Orta was arrested Saturday night on Staten Island, a few blocks from where officers confronted his friend Eric Garner on July 17.

Orta, whose recording of an officer restraining Garner with a chokehold fueled outcry against the police, is charged with two counts of criminal possession of a weapon.

Police said Orta had a previous weapon conviction that prohibited him from possessing a firearm. He is due in court this month on robbery charges stemming from a May arrest and an assault charge from an arrest three days before Garner's death, according to court records.

Orta's latest arrest came a day after the city's medical examiner ruled Garner's death a homicide caused by the officer's chokehold, as well as the compression of his chest and prone positioning "during physical restraint by police."

Patrick Lynch, the president of the city's largest police union, described the encounter between Garner and police as "a tragedy" but said Orta's arrest "only underscores the dangers that brought police officers to respond to a chronic crime condition" in Staten Island's Tompkinsville community.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, who called Orta to the lectern at Garner's funeral and said the city should "thank God" he was there to record video "when the police and EMS failed us," called the arrest irrelevant.

"No one is questioning the validity of the tape, and the medical examiner has validated it," Sharpton said Sunday.

Police said plainclothes officers from a Staten Island narcotics unit saw Orta stuff a silver-colored, .25-caliber handgun into a 17-year-old female companion's waistband after they emerged from a brief stop at the Hotel Richmond. Police called the location, on Central Avenue, a "known drug prone location."