

# State cleaning house at agency

*8/30/2013*

*By GORDON JACKSON*

*The Brunswick News*

The state overseer sent in to run a troubled regional mental health program headquartered in Glynn County has removed its executive director and asked the chairman of its board to resign.

David Crews, who assumed control of Gateway Behavioral Services operations in eight coastal counties, told employees in a letter Thursday that Barbara Meyers had left the agency and was no longer chief executive.

Board chairman Howard Lynn, a former Glynn County commissioner, said Thursday he had refused Crews' request Monday to resign.

Frank Berry, commissioner of the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, sent Crews in July 18 to oversee Gateway, a nonprofit agency that operates with public and private funding, while the state investigates allegations of mismanagement and financial shortfalls. Among the allegations is that money has been diverted improperly to a water bottling plant Gateway operates in Camden County as a sheltered workshop.

Meyers said Thursday that Crews handed her a letter at 3:30 p.m. Wednesday, saying her contract as chief executive was canceled, effective immediately. She was then escorted from the building. "It was certainly a shock," she said.

Meyers, who previously directed Gateway's clinical services, had been chief executive since July 1, after Frank Bonati retired June 30.

Lynn said Thursday he refused Crews' request for his resignation after he said Crews did not give him a reason why he wanted it.

"I'm still on the board," Lynn said. "The commissioner (Berry) will have to send me a letter saying my services are no longer necessary."

Lynn said he is uncertain if he can be removed from an appointed position without cause and called the decision to remove Meyers from her position a "serious mistake."

"She's getting a raw deal," he said.

Lynn speculated that the request for his resignation may have been the result of a disagreement he and Crews had before a board of directors meeting Saturday. Lynn said he objected when Crews tried to change the agenda and proceeded to conduct the meeting.

Lynn said Crews refused to leave the meeting room when board members wanted to discuss in executive session a lawsuit Gateway filed against the state over funding issues. Lynn said board members didn't believe it was appropriate for Crews to remain in the room because he was appointed by the agency Gateway has sued.

"Since 2003, Gateway has been in serious financial straits," Lynn said.

Crews did not immediately return telephone calls to his office and cell phone for comment Thursday.

Meyers said she also believes her dismissal and the request for Lynn's resignation are related to the lawsuit.

"I think the (Department of Behavioral Health) is worried Gateway could win," Meyers said. "I wholeheartedly support Gateway."

Glynn County Commissioner Richard Strickland questioned whether an appointed state official has authority to remove someone from the Gateway board who was appointed by county commissioners. "It certainly concerns the board of commissioners," he said.

In his letter to Gateway employees, Crews said he will continue in his appointed job to determine the extent of problems that forced state oversight of Gateway's operations.

"I recognize the challenges ahead, but I have no doubt that we are setting on a course toward a positive future for this organization, its employees, and most importantly, the individuals, families and communities we serve," Crews said.

The state took over Gateway after Berry said there were indications it was no longer financially able to provide contracted services.

In addition to citing a \$3.8 million deficit as of June 30, 2012, Berry said he had received numerous allegations of mismanagement and misuse of state and federal funds. Some of the financial problems appear to be linked to the GEM water bottling plant at St. Marys that is operating in the red and costs Gateway \$25,000 a month to keep open.

Gateway is a community service board created by the state to offer services to mentally ill and developmentally disabled people in eight coastal counties of Glynn, Camden, McIntosh, Long, Liberty Bryan, Chatham and Effingham.