

MedStar employee claims in lawsuit she was fired for tweeting about hospital's lack of coronavirus safety precautions



The main entrance to MedStar Washington Hospital Center is seen in 2017. (Jacquelyn Martin/AP)

By [Kyle Swenson](#)

Washington Post

May 19, 2020 at 7:46 p.m. EDT

A former employee at the MedStar Washington Hospital Center claims she was fired for raising red flags on social media about what she contends was a lack of safety precautions by the hospital against the spread of the novel [coronavirus](#).

According to a lawsuit filed Friday in D.C. Superior Court, Sarah Cusick's social media posts also prompted the hospital's management to ask her to remove tweets, which she did.

"They called her in and said, 'We want you to remove the posts; this is hurting MedStar's brand,' " Cusick's attorney, Lynne Bernabei, told The Washington Post. "Essentially this is a whistleblower's claim."

So Young Pak, the hospital's director of media relations, told The Post the facility has not yet been served with the lawsuit and "thus cannot offer any comment."

Cusick began working at the MedStar Washington Hospital Center in January 2018. According to her legal complaint, she was a hearing-and-speech assistant and her job entailed conducting newborn hearing screenings and assisting on speech language pathology diagnostics, as well as administrative duties.

The heart of Cusick's legal complaint stems from what she claims was a failure of the hospital's administrators to properly screen patients and others for covid-19 symptoms at the entrances to the facility. For example, by March 13, the hospital "had still not implemented any procedures for screening patients, visitors or members of the public upon entrance to the hospital, in clear violation of CDC recommendations," the lawsuit alleges.

Cusick claimed she made her concerns known to her higher-ups. But after a new protocol was introduced for screening people entering the facility on March 16, Cusick alleged the guidelines were ignored. She also said she observed as social distancing measures were not being enforced in the hospital's cafeteria.

The situation prompted Cusick to reach for her phone and tag the hospital in a Twitter post. "@MedStarWHC can we please follow @_DCHealth guidelines for eating in common areas?," she wrote on March 16 under a video she posted of the busy cafeteria, according to images provided to The Post.

A day later, Cusick again brought the issue up on Twitter, this time tagging the District's mayor.

"@MayorBowser why are cafeterias like this inside the hospitals not being held to the same standards as other public cafeterias/mass gatherings?," she wrote on March 17, according to an image. "Please help protect our healthcare workers and the public @MedStarWHC currently has an open door policy, this is a public access cafeteria."

With screening still allegedly not going on at the hospital's entrances, on March 18 Cusick recorded an interview on her phone with an unidentified security guard who acknowledged individuals walking through the entrances were not being checked at the security desk. Cusick uploaded the clip.

"I am posting this because I care for our patient safety," she wrote later. "I have spoken to my superiors during our briefing and advocated for multiple precautionary measures that are recommended by the CDC, WHO, and @MayorBowser and have not seen action on the 'frontlines.'"

According to the complaint, Cusick was called into a conference room that same day, where members of management told her she had violated "her social media contract and had violated patient and employee rights" under HIPPA.

"They further stated, tellingly, that it was inappropriate for Ms. Cusick to post things like this to social media because it made MedStar's 'brand' look bad."

In tears, Cusick agreed to delete the tweets and maintained “she had consistently voiced her concerns” to her superiors “to no avail,” according to the lawsuit. Social media was a last resort to get management’s attention, she claimed.

After the meeting, Cusick was forced to turn over her hospital identification badge, and all her subsequent work shifts were canceled, the lawsuit claimed.

Kyle Swenson is a reporter with The Washington Post's social issues team. He previously worked at the New Times Broward-Palm Beach and Cleveland Scene.