

State worker says she rented a billboard in Flint and got suspended from her job

Updated: Jul. 21, 2019, 8:53 a.m.

Published: Jul. 21, 2019, 8:11 a.m.

Kim Ehl, a Michigan Department of Health and Human Services employee, paid to put up this billboard in Flint last year. In May, the state disciplined her for posting the DHHS customer service number on a billboard in Flint.

By

Ron Fonger | rfonger1@mlive.com

FLINT, MI -- Kim Ehl got the idea that got her in trouble with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services after seeing the film "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri."

In the movie, actress Frances McDormand challenges local authorities in billboard messages to solve her daughter's murder after they failed to catch the culprit.

Frustrated by what she felt was poor customer service provided at the state DHHS in Flint, Ehl, who was scheduled to work her last day for DHHS this month, paid to put up a single billboard in the parking lot off Clio Road, highlighting one thing -- a customer service phone number set up to provide answers to questions about public assistance benefits.

The billboard went up more than a year ago. A letter sent by the department to Ehl said she was given a three-day misconduct suspension for behaving "in an inappropriate manner" that may harm the reputation of DHHS and for failing to get approval before putting up the billboard.

DHHS provides public assistance, child and family welfare services, and oversees health policy and management in Michigan.

Ehl's billboard advertisement said only, "DHS Customer Service 855-275-6424."

"I couldn't get anyone to listen ... and I did it to piss them off, too," said Ehl, who worked as a general office assistant before taking a leave of absence and transferring to

another DHHS office after the billboard went up in April 2018. "I was protesting poor treatment and neglect of clients ... I wanted to get attention, (and I thought), Why can't I put the (customer service) number up?"

According to a summary of DHHS' investigation into the billboard, Ehl wasn't allowed to display the phone number without prior approval from her superiors -- something she didn't seek.

An employee since 2009, state records show Ehl had no active "corrective/disciplinary action on file" before the billboard incident.

She said she wanted to show the customer service number because local office policy required that clients leave messages with five levels of management before staff could provide the help line information.

"She has raised concerns several times that management has failed to do 'their job' and address employees that were not performing 'up to standards,' " a summary of the investigation by the agency says. Ehl "had been advised by management on all occasions that another employee's performance or lack of would not be discussed with her as this was confidential information."

In an email to MLive-The Flint Journal, Ehl said she became frustrated working at the Flint DHHS office because even though city residents are entitled to certain benefits by law, "the culture of the office never encouraged educating our clientele of what was available."

According to U.S. Census Bureau data from 2017, Flint is the poorest city of its size in the nation. Nearly 39 percent of the city's residents and 60 percent of its children are living in poverty.

Bob Wheaton, a spokesman for DHHS, said the agency doesn't discuss personnel matters like those involving Ehl and her billboard.

"I can tell you that MDHHS has a policy that requires all advertising regarding the the department to be approved by the department's Office of Communications," Wheaton said in an email to The Journal. "Genesee County customers who have questions about their specific cases should call 844-4MI-DHHS (844-464-3447) -- not the number that

was on the billboard, which is intended for answers to basic questions about the types of public assistance benefits offered by MDHHS.”

Ehl said she resigned from her state job effective July 19 because she became so discouraged.

“I just cannot take desperation of people getting poor treatment ...,” she said. “Flint deserves better. Despite being screwed over ... our clients were always kind and gracious towards me.”