

Union nurses battle hospital and DHS over Oregon's safe staffing guidelines

Two Oregon nurses unions are engaged in a public wrangle with hospitals about what constitutes safe staffing levels.

The final phase of a patient safety law the Oregon Legislature passed in 2001 and modified last year is due to take effect in January, but the details, as worked out by the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS), have drawn fire from nurses.

The law limited mandatory overtime and will require each of the state's 62 licensed hospitals to form staffing committees of nurses and managers. The committees would develop a nursing staffing plan that would specify how many nurses are necessary to provide a minimum standard of safe patient care.

That's a huge issue given the ongoing shortage of qualified nurses. Unions have argued that increasing nurse compensation and improving working conditions would allow hospitals to recruit more nurses. The upshot — more nurses per patient — would mean better patient care. Instead, unions say, hospitals are responding to the nursing shortage by short-staffing departments, leading to overwork and forced overtime.

The new law reined in that overtime: Since Jan. 1, 2006, Oregon nurses can't



AFT-Healthcare NW Local 5017 President Kathy Geroux addresses a rally of nurses prior to an Aug. 24 hearing with state officials. (Photo courtesy of AFT-Healthcare NW.)

be required to work more 48 hours in any seven-day period, or more than 12 hours in any 24-hour period. Prior to that, said Matthew Rae, community or-

ganizer for AFT (American Federation of Teachers)-Healthcare Northwest Local 5017 (formerly known as Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals), it was not uncommon for nurses to work 16 hours at a stretch.

But as for the nurse staffing committee, Rae said the hospital association lobbied DHS to water down committee guidelines. Nurses unions want nurses to be able to elect the committee representatives, and want DHS to define which units within the hospital will have their own staffing plan. Hospitals, on the other hand, want to be able to decide how the nurses on the committee will be selected, and want discretion over what units need their own plan.

Lastly, the two sides disagree on how "safe patient care" would be defined: The hospitals want it to mean absence of nurse errors; the unions say it should be presence of good outcomes — physical and spiritual.

DHS' initial rules favored the hospital management viewpoint, Rae said. In response, about 60 members of the Oregon Nurses Association and Local 5016 turned out for a DHS hearing Aug. 24, and several dozen testified, as did a dozen managers.

DHS will make a decision by Jan. 1.

Local Motion

August 2006

Union election activity in Oregon and SW Washington, according to the National Labor Relations Board and the Oregon Employment Relations Board

Elections held

Company		Location	Results:	
			Union	No Union
Date Union				
K.E. McKay's Market				
8/16	UFCW Local 555	Bandon	5	2



Elections requested

Company		Location
Union		# of employees
Safeway deli, McLoughlin Blvd. (decertification)		Milwaukie
United Food & Commercial Workers Local 555		12
Yaquina River Constructors		Eddyville
Operating Engineers Local 701		35
General Distributors (decertification)		Oregon City
Teamsters Local 162		70

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