

Nurses tell public hearing of their problems at Legacy

Nurses from Legacy Health System shared emotional testimony of their struggle to attain safe hospital staffing levels and to unionize in speaking at a public hearing May 31 at Portland Community College's Cascade Campus in North Portland.

Time and time again, registered nurses — some with 30 years of experience — told a Workers' Rights Board panel of being overworked to the point where they were unable to take breaks over a 12-hour shift. Several nurses said they were fired for expressing concerns about staffing levels and others said short-staffing has resulted in poor patient care.

Nurses presented the Board with nearly 1,000 signatures from Legacy nurses who support House Bill 3416 in the Oregon Legislature. The bill to mandate safe patient staffing ratios was supported by the Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals Local 5017. HB 3416 has been stuck in a House committee since April.

The Workers' Rights Board is a project of the Portland chapter of Jobs with Justice. The six-person panel last month consisted of religious, political and community leaders. The event filled PCC's Moriarty Arts and Humanities Auditorium.

"I believe that hospitals will not self-regulate themselves," said Linda Boly, a registered nurse at Good Samaritan Hospital. "I believe that staffing rations equal safe patient care and that we need a union to enforce safe patient care."

Portland-headquartered Legacy has five hospitals and various other facilities in Oregon and Southwest Washington, and employs 3,000 registered nurses; none are represented by a union.

Toren Brolutti worked at Emanuel Hospital for nearly 18 years. Short-staffed and consistently working 12-hour shifts without any breaks, she injured her back. She said her request to return to an eight-hour shift was denied.

"Realizing that I could not return to a working environment of compromised patient care and long

hours without breaks, I successfully landed a job at Kaiser (a union facility)," she said.

Brolutti said having a union isn't first and foremost about empowering nurses. "It is first and foremost about empowering nurses to provide the best patient care." She said at a union facility she has a voice in staffing ratios and patient care. "At Legacy, nurses have no voice and are demoralized by intimidating tactics if they try to exercise a voice. That needs to change," she said.

Deb Peters, a postanesthesia care



Top photos left to right: RNs Annie Berger and David Rohr testify before the Workers' Rights Board.

unit (PACU) nurse for 25 years, said she was fired from Good Sam for speaking up for safe patient assignments and care. Peters told the Board she often was chastised or written up for advocating staffing ratios and patient care.

Teri Cummings, an RN for 29 years, told the Board that she was let go from Meridian Park Hospital after voicing concerns about unsafe staffing levels and working long hours without breaks. She contends management made a conscientious decision to keep staffing hours low and compromising patient safety in order to save money.

Emanuel Hospital Intensive Care Unit nurse David Rohr said he was forced to call the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration on two occasions

after his complaints about worker safety fell on deaf ears. Rohr said nurses have been fired for addressing issues of unsafe staffing and concerns about unsafe patient care. They're labeled as "troublemakers," he said.

"Our staffing matrix seems to change with the budget, not with patient acuity," added Annie Berger, a nurse for 13 years at Legacy Meridian Park Hospital. "It is neither uncommon nor unexpected that day-shift nurses will care for five acutely ill patients at one time. I've seen the night-

shift nurses trying to care for eight acutely ill patients at one time."

Studies have found the optimal workload for a nurse was four patients. "Nurse know in their hearts that when we care for more than four patients at a time, we are not able to give each patient the quality care they are paying for and deserve," Berger said.

According to the Joint Commission for Accreditation of Health Care Organization, short-staffing is a factor in one out of every four unexpected hospital deaths or injuries.

"This to me seems preventable and unacceptable," Berger said.

Hospital management oftentimes will counter that staffing problems are due to a shortage of nurses nationwide and that the problem likely will worsen.

"There is no shortage of nurses in the United States," testified Gordon Lafer, a professor at the Labor Education and Research Center of the University of Oregon.

Lafer said there are enough licensed registered nurses in the country to fill every job, but they are choosing not to work in the hospital industry because of deteriorating working conditions and stagnant wages.

"There is a shortage of those willing to work under current conditions," Lafer said. "The shortage would be solved when administrators make hospitals a decent place to work."

After listening to testimony, the Workers' Rights Board panel — which included Barbara Dudley, ad-

junct professor at Portland State University; Rev. Alcena Boozer of Saint Phillip the Deacon Episcopal Church; Dr. Karen Erde, a primary care physician; State Rep. Tina Kotek, Joice Taylor, CEO of Global Management Strategies Inc., and Maribeth Healey, executive director of Oregonians for Health Security — said that they would try to set up a meeting with Legacy Health System's CEO Lee Domanico to discuss what they had heard and ask Legacy to institute safe staffing levels and agree to fair ground rules for union organizing.

The American Federation of Teachers-Oregon has formed a group, United Nurses of Legacy (UNL), in an effort to organize the nurses at Legacy Health System. Local 5017 is an affiliate of AFT. The union represents nurses at Kaiser Sunnyside Medical Center and Providence Milwaukie Hospital.

Certified nurse assistants, housekeepers, nutritionists and emergency room technicians at Legacy Emanuel Hospital and Good Samaritan Hospital are members of Service Employees Local 49.



A tearful Deb Peters (left) gets a supportive hug from Kathy Geroux, president of the Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals Local 5017. Peters said she was fired from Good Samaritan Hospital after speaking up for save patient assignments.



Workers' Rights Board members from left to right Joice Taylor, Maribeth Healey and Rev. Alcena Boozer listen to testimony from Kathy Sharp, an RN at Good Samaritan Hospital since 1979.