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COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Union contract puts Avamere at the top in nursing home pay

SEIU says new industry-leading agreement will result in better care for residents.

By Don McIntosh

A new collective bargaining agreement between Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503 and Avamere raises workers' wages by up to \$4 an hour, and sets the highest standard for wages and staffing levels of any nursing homes in Oregon.

The three-year agreement was ratified almost unanimously April 12-15 by members voting in nursing home parking lots. It covers about 550 workers at 19 Oregon nursing homes owned by the Avamere chain. It took effect May 1, and runs through April 30, 2024.

The contract sets a new statewide nine-step wage scale, replacing regional 12-step wage scales under which Eugene and Bend area workers earned less than those in Portland. Under the new wage scale, pay ranges from \$18 to \$23.49 for certified nursing assistants (CNAs), \$16.79 to \$21.90 for cooks, and \$15.93 to \$20.79 for housekeep-

ers. Depending on where they work and what they do, workers will see raises of as much as \$4 an hour under the new scale.

For CNAs, Avamere's new wage levels will exceed wages paid at some hospitals. That's important because CNAs have tended to earn less at nursing homes than at hospitals, which has made it hard for nursing homes to keep experienced staff; the resulting turnover lessens the quality of care.

"People are very excited," says bargaining team member Sam Browne, a CNA at Avamere Rehabilitation of Beaverton. For Brown, it was the second time serving as part of the union bargaining team, and a completely different experience from the first time. Avamere's contract with the union wasn't set to expire until October, the same as unionized nursing home chains. [Besides Avamere, Local 503 represents workers at Oregon nursing homes owned by Avalon, Dakavia, EmpRes, Prestige, and at independent Meadow Park Health & Specialty Care in St. Helens.] But Avamere approached Local 503 about start-

ing early, and agreed to the union's proposed ground rules, including a trial run of "interest-based" bargaining, a less adversarial and more collaborative approach to negotiation in which the two sides try to solve problems together in a way that serves both sides' interests.

The new contract will improve the quality care nursing home residents receive, Browne said: "Happier workers, happier workplace."

Headquartered in Wilsonville, Oregon, Avamere has over 8,800 employees at over 300 facilities in 20 states. Its properties include not just nursing homes but assisted living centers, memory care facilities, and retirement communities. Local 503 represents workers at 19 of Avamere's 21 nursing homes in Oregon, as well as workers at nine of Avamere's assisted living centers in Oregon under a different collective bargaining agreement.

But more Avamere facilities could also unionize thanks to union neutrality provisions in the new contract. For non-union nursing homes in Oregon, the contract commits the company to provide employee lists and

contact information to the union, give reasonable access to union organizers to talk with workers in the workplace, and recognize a union at any Oregon facility where a majority of workers sign union authorization cards.

The contract also adds longevity bonuses, increases shift differential pay, establishes protections against management bullying, and makes workers freer to speak their minds by eliminating a previous anti-disparagement clause.

Other provisions:

Wage reopeners: The two sides will meet again in April 2022 and April 2023 to negotiate further cost of living increases to take effect May 1 of each year.

Improved staffing levels: Avamere also commits to work with the union to set staffing ratios for CNAs and housekeepers that are above what's required by Oregon law, and for CNAs it commits to try out an "acuity" - based staffing model that takes into account how much care individual patients need.

Improved training: Newly hired CNAs will be mentored before being added to shifts.

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