

# NORTHWEST LABOR PRESS

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# Nurse union warns staffing shortage is at crisis levels

By Don McIntosh

For years, nurse unions have been sounding the alarm about understaffing: Hospitals have not been scheduling enough nurses to serve patients well, and that's resulting in missed breaks and nurse burnout. Now, 18 months into a global pandemic, the staffing shortage itself is becoming an urgent public health crisis, leaders of Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) said in an online Oct. 7 press conference.

In Oregon, Providence alone has 2,000 openings in caregiver positions, ONA said. Hospitals are employing traveling nurses as an expensive fix. Up to 30% of the nursing staff in some hospitals are travelers.

Meanwhile, in a union survey at OHSU, 86% of nurses reported fatigue, burnout and morale distress, and 60% said they're considering leaving the profession.

Gov. Kate Brown's vaccine mandate will make the shortage worse Oct. 18, when hospitals remove the 4% to 10% of nurses who are unvaccinated.

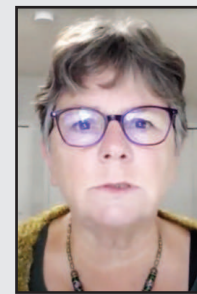
"When hospitals are short staffed, you and your family members pay the price," said ONA president Lynda Pond. "You pay it with 12-hour ER visits, you pay it with more hospital

injuries and infections. Your grandmother pays it when she has to go back to chemo because her cancer surgery was postponed due to a lack of staff. We all pay the taxes to cover the cost of hundreds of traveling nurses and 1,500 National Guard members who are called upon to plug the gaps. And finally, you pay it with a higher risk of death when you enter the hospital. Decades of research have shown that nurse staffing is one of the most effective, affordable ways to keep patients healthy."

ONA isn't just complaining about the crisis; it's proposing solutions, if hospitals, the governor, and lawmakers will listen:

- **Hospitals:** Start honoring legally required meal and rest breaks, and replace the "buddy system" of breaks with designated break nurses. And end the expensive and unsustainable practice of relying on traveling nurses.
- **Nursing schools:** Increase nursing faculty salaries to mirror clinical salaries, and increase the number and size of nursing student scholarships.
- **Governor Brown:** Create a commission to systemically review Oregon healthcare staffing
- **Oregon Legislature:** Provide loan forgiveness to nursing students who agree to complete four years of work in areas of great need.

## HOSPITALS—AND LAWMAKERS—NEED TO LISTEN TO NURSES. HERE'S WHAT THREE WHO ARE OFFICERS OF THE OREGON NURSES ASSOCIATION HAD TO SAY:



### STAFFING WAS ALREADY A PROBLEM

"Nurses have been demanding that hospitals address short staffing for years, and hospital executives have ignored us, because it's cheaper to run lean, it's cheaper to stretch the people and resources, it's cheaper to hire one nurse to do the job of two to three."

—Lynda Pond, Sacred Heart in Springfield

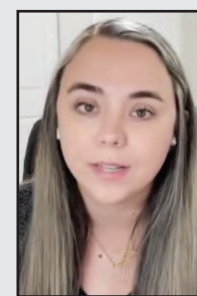
### THEN THE PANDEMIC TOOK A TOLL ON MORALE

"One of the most distressing things is seeing the despair on the nurses' faces, and the fatigue, and it's more profound than I've ever seen. To see the whole ICU filled with the same diagnosis, that never happened. In flu season we might have five or six flu patients in the ICU, not 30 with the same diagnosis. That's like a mass casualty event."

—Matt Calzia, Sacred Heart in Springfield



### NOW NURSES ARE WORRIED FOR THE FUTURE



"We are concerned that burnout will lead to nurses leaving the bedside—and, in Oregon, we will not be able to educate a large enough number of nurses to replace them.... Many potential nurses look at the profession with suspicion. Why would a young person choose to enter nursing, when the job is so difficult?"

—Natasha Schwartz, OHSU

## CORRECTIONS

Based on inaccurate information we were provided, we reported in our Oct. 1 issue that the first-ever union contract at Beneficial State Bank covers about 150 employees, but the actual number is 96.

An article on the looming Hollywood strike in our Oct. 1 issue identified **cdavid cottrell** as IATSE Local 488 vice president. But that's his former title; cottrell has been southern region business agent for the local since 2019.

In a report on the Oregon building trades convention in our Oct. 1 issue, we misidentified a participant on a panel about the council's history. Retired Pendleton Building Trades leader **George Gritz** took part, but we reported it was his son Jeff Gritz, also a Pendleton Building Trades leader and leader of the District Council of Laborers.



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