

- The group City Accountability says it has less than two weeks to complete signature gathering to put a Charter Amendment on the ballot amending Eugene's Charter **to establish an office of an independent elected city auditor.** To sign the petition, look for their volunteers in turquoise T-shirts at Sundance, Kiva, the downtown library, the Saturday Market and also at LCC center building Oct 3-6. For more info: cityaccountability.org

- Willamette Valley Sustainable Foods Alliance's **Fun with Fermentation** is 11 am- 4 pm Sunday, Oct. 1, Lane Community College's Downtown Campus. The one-day festival is "devoted to the education of fermentation and other forms of food preservation," organizers say. It is a fundraiser for WVSFA and a canned food drive for FOOD For Lane County. There will be a raffle whose proceeds will benefit Willamette Farm and Food Coalitions Double Up Food Bucks program that assists SNAP shoppers in procuring more fresh produce at farmers market. Suggested donation of \$5 with 2 cans of food, \$10 without food. Kids 12 and under get in free.

- Church Women United of Lane County, "United for Peace and Justice," invites you to an October forum presented by Diana Janz, founder and president of Hope Ranch, who has been **working with survivors of sex trafficking since 2010.** The organization concentrates on prevention and education as well as helping survivors. Church Women says that Janz will be talking about what is happening worldwide, what is happening in Lane County, what is being done and how we can all help. United Way will also discuss the relationship between poverty/hunger and sex trafficking. Join them at Friends Meeting 9 am, Oct. 6, and you can also join a small group discussion on the topic 7:30 am Tuesday, Oct. 10, at Brails.

- **The Springfield Arts Commission, which promotes visual and performance arts to enrich cultural awareness in Springfield,** is seeking applicants with strong interest in the arts who are willing to help the commission promote arts activities in our city. Both of the upcoming vacancies are held by current commissioners who are eligible to reapply, the city of Springfield says in a press release. The deadline to submit applications is 5 pm Friday, Oct. 6. Application packets are available at the Springfield City Manager's Office, 225 Fifth Street, during regular business hours and online at [springfield-or.gov/bcc.htm](http://springfield-or.gov/bcc.htm). Applicants must attend the Springfield Arts Commission meeting 6:30 pm, Tuesday, Oct. 10, at City Hall in the Library Conference Room, to meet the commission and may be asked to attend the City Council meeting Monday, Nov. 13.

# COUNTY STRIKE

*As negotiations stall, labor unions ramp up pressure on county*

**Y**ou wouldn't layoff a teacher and make them reapply every year," says Emily Miller, an expanded practice dental hygienist for Lane County Public Health. Miller provides dental screenings throughout the county for infants, preschoolers and elementary students as an employee of Lane County. Because she has a license beyond a normal dental hygiene degree, she practices without the supervision of a dentist. But as a part-time employee, contracted to work 1,040 hours a year, she must reapply each year for the same job she has held for the past decade.

County workers from the AFSCME Local 2831 general and nurse's union, which Miller is represented by, overwhelmingly voted Sept. 19 and 21 to authorize a strike if Lane County does not improve its current contract offer. The strike could occur as soon as mid-October, according to union president LaRece Rivera.

The general unit represents 575 county workers, and the nurse's unit has 98 county employees.

County public health employees and general service providers are often the face of county services. As public employees, they treat some of the most vulnerable populations in the county and help provide the in-person services many Lane County residents depend on.

Major sticking points in the negotiations have been health insurance for part-time workers, the county asking workers to pay insurance premiums, and gaps between current wages and market wages for county employees. Negotiations have exposed a nearly \$25 million gap between union and county proposals.

County labor deals are negotiated in three-year cycles.

The county has proposed giving workers an annual two-percent cost-of-living wage increase and adjusting some workers' pay scales based on market rates, while asking the union members to begin paying their insurance premiums.

For some workers, the two-percent increase would not offset the premium, which would range from \$20 to \$70 a month. According to union members and organizers, the county's current plan would mean that lower-income employees would make less next year than they make now.

According to Lane County Public Information Officer Devon Ashbridge, the 21 employees who would have made less under the new contract will receive a one-time payment of \$175, which the county calculates would offset the cost of paying for health insurance until the annual two percent raise covers the cost.

LaRece Rivera, a county stores clerk and the president of the general and nurse unions, says wages for county employees have been kept low "because in the past we've negotiated to maintain health benefits at the expense of wages." With the county now asking for employees to chip in on health insurance, the sting of the low wages is coming to a breaking point.

"I've been representing the union here since 2000, and I've never seen folks with so much conviction," says AFSCME council representative Jim Steiner. "The county knows they deserve more — it ain't right."

Union members have been pushing back against a letter county administrator Steve Mokrohisky sent to employees Sept. 19, the day the general unit authorized a strike. In the letter, Mokrohisky writes that the union was asking for a \$43 million increase in compensation over the next three years. The county now acknowledges that this number is \$32.6 million and says the previous figure came from earlier AFSCME filings.

In a written statement Ashridge says, "At the end of the day, Lane County and its taxpayers simply don't have the \$32.6 million AFSCME leadership has proposed in increases to current wages and benefits over the next three years."

Mokrohisky will earn \$192,000 in 2017, a more than 16 percent raise since being hired in 2014. Mokrohisky's benefit package of over \$43,000 nearly equals the median income of workers in the general workers union.



**CHRISTINE YONKERS ADDRESSES COUNTY UNION WORKERS AT A SEPT. 18 RALLY**

The general union represents many of the lowest-paid workers in the county and is more than 70 percent women; the nurse's unit is more than 90 percent women. Union president Rivera says "this is a chance where the county can help build women up and especially single moms. It feels like there's a lack of love for long-term employees."

In the nurse's bargaining unit, the biggest issue is being underpaid compared to their industry peers. Union and county negotiators have argued over who in the industry their pay should be similar to. The county uses Washington, Clackamas, Marion, Jackson and Deschutes counties, while the union would like to see their nurse's pay based on what they believe are more relevant comparisons, including Multnomah County and local private providers.

Union negotiators argue that Multnomah County pay rates are more valid because the more populous county offers services similar to the services provided by Lane County Public Health.

"The county is going to lose people who care about the people they serve," a patient health care coordinator at the county's public health department.

Patients seen by the county health clinic are among the most vulnerable in the community. Many have either no health insurance or have plans that are not accepted by private hospitals in the area. According to Yonkers, "some of our low-paid county workers qualify for the services we provide."

"It's difficult hiring and retaining nurses," she says. "Our nurses go to other places with better wages. We have a huge amount of turnover."

A common theme among county employees is that they like working for the community but don't think they're getting a fair deal.

Miller, the expanded practice dental hygienist, sees scores of kids daily in local schools, and the county bills for her services. But even after working for the county for 10 years she is forced to reapply each year and, because she is considered a part-time worker, receives no health benefits.

County public information officer Ashbridge says, "The cost to re-hire temporary employees is minimal when compared to the cost to fully insure those same temporary employees. We would not be able to afford the same number of temporary employees if we were to also offer benefits."

Miller was told by the county that she wasn't eligible to receive a free flu shot at the county employee health fair this year, despite the fact she examines children's mouths for a living.

"It's not right that a public health worker doesn't even get health insurance," Miller says.

"I do what I do because I want to keep kids out of pain," says Miller as she chokes back tears. "I just want health insurance and to not have to reapply every year." ■

*The union is planning a "Rally To Support The Workers Of Lane County" 5:30 pm Thursday, Sept. 28, in Wayne Morse Free Speech Plaza.*