

Exposed, But Not Protected

UNION SAYS **ESSENTIAL WORKERS** AT LOCAL HOSPITALS ARE NOT RECEIVING COVID-19 BENEFITS

By Taylor Perse

When Aaron Green, a nursing assistant at McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center, got sick with what he believed was COVID-19 while working with infected patients, he expected his employer to provide the basics: getting him tested, paying him sick leave to stay home and coverage for any treatment.

But he says he didn't get any of those benefits and instead was told to isolate in his home, was forced to go into negative paid-time-off and even collect a week of unemployment.

Local hospitals are not providing the basic benefits for their essential workers, according to SEIU Local 49 union's demands and its evaluation of these hospitals. Both McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center and PeaceHealth Sacred Heart Medical Centers received failing scores on the union's evaluations.

The health care branch of SEIU Local 49 covers hospitals throughout Oregon and southwest Washington, representing workers who are not nurses but are still working on the front lines such as housekeepers, cafeteria workers, check-in staff, certified nursing assistants (CNA) such as Green and emergency department technicians. Many of these essential workers face the risk of being exposed to patients with COVID-19.

After initially agreeing to comment, McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center did not respond to *Eugene Weekly's* questions, but instead issued a statement: "We offer benefits to our employees as mutually agreed upon through our union contracts," spokesperson Jana Waterman writes in an email.

In an email, local PeaceHealth communication specialist Anne Williams said on behalf of the hospital that

it has not seen the scorecard, and gave a list of benefits for caregivers, which incorporates everyone employed by PeaceHealth. These benefits include 100 percent coverage of testing, free child care, temporary paid sick time for all full-time and part-time caregivers, full pay protection and more.

SEIU argues that during a pandemic, that isn't enough. "Eugene hospitals are definitely failing to meet worker needs," Mike Morris, assistant director for the SEIU health care division, says. He says the union has called on these hospitals to keep workers and the community safe.

Morris says that SEIU submitted a series of formal demands based on what workers explained they needed. As the pandemic wore on, the union scored the hospitals on whether they provided coverage for COVID-19 testing, giving workers hazard pay, child care assistance, a moratorium on involuntary cut hours and paid leave for any virus related absences. According to the scorecard, they haven't.

When elective surgeries closed down at McKenzie-Willamette, Green says he volunteered to work in the COVID-19 triage tent so that he could still work and get paid.

Nine days after coming in contact with a positive COVID-19 patient, Green began to develop symptoms. He contacted the hospital about being tested, but was referred to his primary care physician, who couldn't test him due to limited tests at the time.

Green says he was told to isolate for 14 days, and he worried about how to pay his bills. He says his wife works at PeaceHealth, and even on a joint income there are times when they live month-to-month.

"McKenzie wasn't offering paid time off to the exposed," Green says. "I had to use 40 hours of my own paid time off." Because of a recent surgery, Green didn't

have enough PTO left, and alleges the hospital told him he had to use up to 40 hours of "negative PTO," which means he owes the hospital hours. Then he had to take a week of unemployment.

He didn't feel better for several weeks and never knew if his sickness was the coronavirus.

"A lot of hospital workers live paycheck to paycheck. It's not easy," Green says. He adds that many essential workers have kids at home and are possibly bringing the virus back to them.

McKenzie-Willamette decided to reopen for non-emergency procedures on May 1, in line with Gov. Kate Brown's ordinance.

"They decided to test all the patients having surgery. I asked them, 'Shouldn't we be testing surgical staff first because we could be asymptomatic?'" Green asks. He says the hospital responded that it would be difficult logistically, but they could look into it.

In addition to being exposed and not tested, Green says essential workers still only wear one mask a day, even if they are going into multiple procedure rooms or from isolation to other patients.

"It doesn't seem right that we will be doing more surgeries if we can't change masks."

When re-evaluated the week of May 11, SEIU has changed McKenzie-Willamette's rating from an F to a D-, because it now provides full coverage of COVID-19 treatment and testing for workers and their families. But according to the evaluation, workers are still not receiving hazard pay and other workers are furloughed — making more from unemployment than they would at their jobs.

"We shouldn't be making more money when we are not working than when we are working," Green says. "That's not why I got into health care, but to help people. We should be paid a living affordable wage." ■

HAPPENING PEOPLE by Paul Neevel

Dave Owens

In observance of National Social Work Month in March, the Oregon Department of Human Services named Dave Owens of Eugene winner of the 2019 Tom Moan Memorial Award, recognizing achievement by a child welfare caseworker. "We are proud of Dave's work strengthening Lane County's children and families," says Child Welfare Director Rebecca Jones Gaston. "He is thoughtful and humble, and those he works with know he is not there to judge but to help."

Born in Lynwood, California, Owens moved with his family to Port Orford, on the southern Oregon coast, at age 4. "Moving to Oregon is my earliest memory," says Owens, who graduated from Pacific High School in the Port Orford-Langlois School District. He came to Eugene to study at Northwest Christian College, where he majored in youth ministry and minored in music performance. He met his wife, Tina, in the school's

traveling promotional music group, Pilgrimage. "We were gone Friday to Sunday every weekend," he relates, "visiting a church in Washington, Oregon, California or Idaho." Owens worked as a youth minister for a year after graduation, then took a job with another church, working in day treatment with troubled kids in Lane County residential and juvenile corrections facilities for three years. Afterward, he and Tina moved to Los Angeles, where he taught high school for six years in the San Pedro Narbonne Community Adult School. "But we didn't want to raise kids in L.A.," he says, so they moved back to Oregon with their two young sons in 1999, and he began work with Oregon Child Welfare. "It will be 21 years in July. I work with residential and hard-to-place youth. The child contact, dealing with children, treating them special, has kept me going. My goal is to help families get back together."

