



EO Media Group

Emergency room personnel hustle to care for patients at St. Charles Bend in August.

# New union drive at St. Charles

By SUZANNE ROIG  
The Bulletin

BEND — More than half of the St. Charles Health System hospice and home health nurses have formally asked for a union election with the National Labor Relations Board.

The nurses filed with the labor board after the health system declined to recognize their right to join the Oregon Nurses Association without a formal vote. The union already represents about 1,200 nurses at multiple St. Charles Health System facilities, according to a union statement released Wednesday.

Nurses say they need a union for collective bargaining because they have been feeling a push from the health system to increase productivity. On average, a home health nurse will see five to six patients a day and those patients can be anywhere from Gilchrist to Warm Springs, said Karin Arthur, a registered nurse who is a home health nurse.

“We recognize and respect the right of our employees, including our nurses, to freely choose whether they wish to be represented by a union,” said Lisa Goodman, St. Charles Health System spokeswoman. “We also respect the National Labor Relations Board processes that allow our employees the opportunity to participate in a secret ballot election following the NLRB’s review of the proposed bargaining unit.”

Because a majority of the 39 workers in these two divisions signed union cards indicat-

ing they supported a union, the nurses wanted to bypass a labor board vote.

“Ever since all the trouble with the finances came out, the health system has been pushing onto the nurses efficiency,” said Arthur. “They want us to see more patients, but not giving us more time.”

For home health care, each visit takes about an hour. There’s travel time, and nurses have to record their actions and observations. Sometimes they have to contact the physician if there’s a change needed.

By forming a union, the nurses will be able to ensure that they receive fair treatment, access to due process and adequate compensation, according to the union statement.

The health system also is facing union representation from doctors at the St. Charles Medical Group who said they wanted a bigger role in establishing patient care. A vote has not been held yet for that union, which initially filed in June and again in August. Calling themselves the Central Oregon Providers Network, the group of physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants and other health care workers, signed cards indicating support to unionize, citing management choices, financial decisions and quality of patient care as their chief concerns.

The union is under the umbrella of the American Federation of Teachers, a national union that includes 200,000 health care members and 1.7 million teachers.

# Food bank sees spike in demand

By COURTNEY VAUGHN  
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — It’s been more than 50 years since the White House announced a plan to address food, nutrition and hunger, but a new federal strategy aims to curb food scarcity and diet-related disease.

On Sept. 27, the Biden-Harris administration rolled out plans to expand Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits and tax credits, while increasing healthy eating and exercise among Americans.

The announcement couldn’t come soon enough. In Oregon, there’s been a sharp increase in the number of people who face food insecurity since the pandemic.

The Oregon Food Bank went from serving 860,000 people in Oregon and Southwest Washington in 2019 to 1.2 million people in 2021. This year, the organization expects to help 1.5 million people.

“We’re at historic levels of hunger,” said Susannah Morgan, CEO of the Oregon Food Bank. She said food assistance programs should be considered the last tier in America’s social safety net program. If more people are relying on food pantries or federal food benefits, that means the whole system is askew.

“The best defense against (poverty) is offense: living wages, access to housing, to food, and when we look around, we are not meeting the needs of everyone,” Morgan said. “The final line of defense is the food assistance program. When you see more people asking for food it’s because the social safety nets aren’t working. I think we’re a warning sign.”

Morgan notes that the majority of people the Food Bank serves have jobs and income, but aren’t bringing in enough to comfortably pay bills and buy groceries each month. With inflation and a dramatic increase in rent prices over the past two years, people are feeling the pinch.

“There are a lot of folks living with food insecurity,” Morgan said. “They’re living on a fixed income and it’s never enough. They’re making trade-offs between paying for heating or food, or medicine or food. The root cause of poverty is systemic inequities.”

President Biden’s announcement this week came with an ambitious goal: ending hunger, while increasing healthy eating and physical activity by



123RF Photo

Oregon Food Bank officials say the need for food assistance in the state is at “historic” levels.

2030, in an effort to reduce diet-related diseases and health disparities.

To get there, the president proposes changes to food labeling on the front of packages, updating nutrition criteria for healthy meals, expanding incentives for fruit and vegetables in SNAP benefits, reducing sodium in the food supply and testing out meals medically tailored to patients in the Medicare program, among other measures.

“More than 50 years since the first White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health, the U.S. has yet to end hunger and is facing an urgent, nutrition-related health crisis — the rising prevalence of diet-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes, obesity, hypertension and certain cancers,” Biden’s White House announcement states. “The consequences of food insecurity and diet-related diseases are significant, far reaching, and disproportionately impact historically underserved communities.”

That’s a step in the right direction, the Oregon Food Bank CEO said, but addressing the root cause of hunger and empowering people to buy healthier food will take more than an expansion of welfare programs.

Morgan said she sees stronger programs in place now, compared with two years ago, including the expansion of a crucial benefit during the pandemic: the child tax credit.

President Biden’s plan calls for pushing Congress to permanently extend the expanded Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit while raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour and making sure more people are able to access health insur-

ance coverage through Medicaid.

The Child Tax Credit — an existing federal benefit put in place in 1997 that allows households with dependent children to receive a credit on their taxes — was expanded with the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act. According to the White House, the expansion “helped cut child poverty nearly in half” while reducing food insecurity by nearly 26%, leading to the lowest rates of childhood hunger ever recorded.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 28.2 million people claimed the tax credit in 2017, with the average filer receiving a \$998 credit.

But even an economy that has seen wages increase along with demand for employees is still struggling to prevent a large portion of people from needing social services. That’s largely because of federal rules tied to SNAP benefits, formerly known as food stamps, that cut off many immigrants from getting help.

“As a nation, our single biggest safety net program for addressing hunger is SNAP,” Morgan noted. “By federal law, SNAP is only available to people who have been legal citizens of the United States for 60 months. That means 112,000 of our neighbors in Oregon aren’t getting help.”

“I just fundamentally believe that food is a human right,” Morgan said, emphatically. “It should not rely on the color of your skin, who you love or where you were born. The richest country in the nation should be able to ensure that everybody has enough food to eat.”

THIS IS OCF  
**NeighbORly**

[ INSPIRING KINDNESS ACROSS OREGON ]

Every third Tuesday this kindness crew honors the elderly community in Ontario, Oregon by creating delicious bento lunches that are delivered right to their front doors. “Food like this is hard to find in our area. We provide it to bring them nourishment, comfort and joy,” says Perla Lopez (center). OCF supports projects like these through donor funds granted to local nonprofits. Want to help your community, become a donor or apply for a grant? Visit [oregoncf.org/neighborly](https://oregoncf.org/neighborly) to learn, connect and get inspired.



Oregon  
Community  
Foundation