

Union Staffers Say They Were Shoved During Hospital Event

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Two union staffers were allegedly shoved by a security guard during the groundbreaking ceremony for a new emergency room at a San Fernando Valley hospital Wednesday, union officials said.

About 20 nurses and other workers held a large banner protesting staffing levels alongside West Hills Hospital officials posing for a photograph, said John Kosinski, a political organizer for the Service Employees International Union, who said he was pushed by a guard.

"It was total chaos," Kosinski said. "This wasn't a strike; it was a banner unfurling. This was just unprovoked aggression."

The banner read: "It's time to break new ground in safe staffing levels."

Kosinski said a man identifying himself as a security guard shoved him into a tractor that was used as a photo backdrop for hospital officials.

Soon after, another union

staffer, Leighton Woodhouse, was pushed to the ground, and "his glasses went flying over the cement," Kosinski said.

Then another security guard grabbed union staff member Dan Bennington by the neck, Kosinski said. No one was seriously hurt, Kosinski said.

He and Woodhouse filed a complaint alleging battery with the Los Angeles Police Department against one of the security guards, Kosinski said.

A hospital official declined to comment on specifics of the union allegations, but released a statement criticizing the union for choosing to "deliberately disrupt this celebration."

"We have an obligation to provide for the safety of those attending and working at the event and took appropriate steps to do so," the statement said.

Jill Dolan, a hospital spokeswoman, said disruptive activities included demonstrators walking around the perimeter of a tent housing the ceremony with the big banner, yelling, and trying to enter the tent.

Officials at the hospital, which is owned by HCA, the nation's largest hospital chain, intended the ceremony to highlight West Hills' planned \$40-million upgrade, which would add a two-story addition scheduled to open in 2008.

The addition includes plans for a 24-bed emergency department as well as expanded intensive-care and critical-care units that would double the number of available beds to 34.

Union officials and employees said they were protesting staffing levels, not expansion plans. With state requirements mandating minimum staffing for nurses, union officials say other employees, such as nursing assistants and housekeepers, are being cut by layoffs or attrition.

That means nurses are starting to do the non-medical jobs that assistants once did, such as changing sheets or helping patients to the restroom.

"They're cutting staffing to the bare bones to meet their profit goals," said Estella Chavez, a registered nurse.