



Hospital's workers seek staffing input

RIVERSIDE COMMUNITY: Union wants terms in their next pact to be reviewed by an arbiter.

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One of the largest unions in Riverside has begun negotiating a contract for nearly 1,500 hospital workers.

The Service Employees International Union, which has represented the workers at Riverside Community Hospital since 2003, wants better wages and benefits in the next contract, as well as new staffing procedures, said union negotiator Dana Simon.

The current contract, which has been in effect since 2004, will expire July 1.

Simon said the union's position is that the hospital is understaffed, especially since it cut its work force by 32 positions in 2003.

The union wants the hospital to submit proposed staffing changes to an independent arbiter who knows the hospital industry, something other hospitals have done, he said.

"We're not saying you need to double the number of staff," Simon said. "But in a couple of critical positions, one or two more people can be critical."

Tracy Dallarda, the hospital's vice president of marketing and public relations, said the administration opposes using arbitration to set staffing levels.

"We believe that a safe staffing level is best achieved by hospital administration -- with, of course, consultation with staff," Dallarda said.

She said she expects the hospital to offer "very competitive" wages and benefits and both sides to agree to a new contract before the deadline.

Russel Main, a respiratory therapist at the hospital, said he's worried that patient care could be hurt if staffing isn't increased.

"They just want to do the bare-minimum level of staffing," he said.