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Los Robles workers authorize a strike

Hospital staffing policies an issue, they say

**By Stephanie Hoops,
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Los Robles Hospital & Medical Center could soon be hit with its first strike since opening in 1968. Unhappy with working conditions at the Thousand Oaks hospital and having failed to reach a timely new agreement with management, the hospital staff authorized a strike in a vote Wednesday.

No strike has been set yet, however, and the Service Employees International Union must give the hospital 10 days' notice before picketing. Dana Simon, administrative vice president of SEIU United Healthcare Workers Union West, said 90 percent of those voting authorized a strike.

Hospital President and CEO Jim Sherman remained optimistic Wednesday that a new agreement would be reached by a deadline at the end of July.

"We're not panic-stricken," he said.

The hospital is owned by HCA Inc., the nation's largest for-profit hospital chain, based in Nashville, Tenn.

Bargaining talks are scheduled for Tuesday and Wednesday of next week. The SEIU represents about 1,000 healthcare workers at Los Robles.

Besides asking for higher wages and better benefits, the staff is unhappy because the hospital uses a large percentage of temporary laborers. The nurses want more of a voice in how temporary laborers are used.

Nurses and others say that while a lot of attention has been paid to

staffing levels, more attention needs to be given to the actual staff the hospital has.

Los Robles uses more temporary labor than any other hospital in the county. Nearly one-quarter (23.4 percent) of its nursing staff, which includes RNs, LVNs, aides and orderlies, are temps, according to the most recent annual financial data available from the state.

Community Memorial Hospital in Ventura, by comparison, uses only 5.6 percent.

Newer data from the current year shows the percentage of temporaries has dropped, Sherman said, to 17 percent. That number is still high in comparison with other hospitals in the county, the highest of which is operating with under 14 percent.

Steep learning curve

At Los Robles, Lory Breitzman, a registered nurse, often works with traveling nurses, who come for a set number of weeks and then leave.

"We've had people from England, Australia, Canada — so many I can't remember," she said. "And I don't want to imply that they're not a great addition to our team, but they are here for only a few weeks."

That's not long enough, she said, for them to fully immerse themselves in the hospital's systems and policies, get to know the physicians, sit on patient-care committees, and get and give input.

"If you look at our policy book," she said "it must have 200 pages in it. How can someone be familiar with that in a few weeks' time?"

"They're there for 12 to 13 weeks and aren't committed to the community or the hospital. It doesn't mean that they're unkind people, but when you have an interest in living long-term in your community, you care more about your reputation, how management thinks of you and how your co-workers think of you."

It's also a drain on the existing staff, nurses said.

"What we end up doing is training these people and they leave," said registered nurse Eileen Hctor. "It's a big problem because you don't know who you're going to be working with and there's no loyalty."

Patient care unaffected

Research has shown that temporaries are not good for morale, but it does not show they are bad caregivers.

"We tried to determine if having a large percentage of temporary staff had an impact on patient outcomes, and it didn't," said Jean Ann Seago, a nurse and research scientist at the University of California, San Francisco, who has written extensively about health work force issues. "There was no relationship at all."

But, she said: "In terms of having your own staff satisfaction, the people who work with temporary people are less satisfied. It's essentially an increased workload for existing staff. It takes up time."

While Sherman said he'd rather not use so many travelers, it's hard to get people to move to an expensive area like Thousand Oaks. He indicated travelers sometimes stay for longer than three months, taking on second and third assignments, sometimes staying for six to nine months.

Even when they want to join the permanent staff, he said they often cannot find affordable housing. "We have one that's been here since 2004," he said.

Temporaries and travelers are not going to go away, said California Hospital Association spokeswoman Jan Emerson. It's a simple fact that hospitals have to comply with state-mandated staffing levels, and there simply aren't enough caregivers to fill the need.

Questions that need answers

Still, when data show one hospital having a higher need for temporaries than any other hospital in a county, it raises several questions, said Dr. Robert Wachter, a professor at the University of California, San Francisco, and recognized expert on hospital safety.

"The questions I would ask a hospital having a high need for temporaries and travelers is: What is the environment for a nurse?" Wachter said. "Is it a collegial place for a nurse? Is it a cordial place for them? Are they respected? What is the relationship with nurses and the administration? Before going out and hiring a lot of temps, I'd make sure nurses are happy and satisfied."

In San Francisco, hospitals are realizing that keeping nurses on staff is not just about money, he said. They have gone from systems in which doctors associate with doctors and nurses with nurses to interacting in a collaborative, respectful way. In fact, Wachter and his colleagues are training with pilots and other aviation specialists who are teaching them how to work as a team.

"If you're going to keep your nurses and recruit new ones, you need to figure out how to create satisfying lives for them," Wachter said.

"When I see the huge need for travelers and temps, I wonder, what is the culture?"

CEO cites 'good rapport'

Of the culture at Los Robles, Sherman said, "I think overall the nurses feel valued, and many have been here a long time, and there's a good rapport with the medical staff."

Rebecca Long has been a nurse at Los Robles for 19 years. She doesn't want to strike, saying she comes from a family that typically sides with corporations over unions. But, she said, she will join the battle because she is not happy with the status quo.

"It seems like it's not an environment that is nurturing," she said.

"They're not doing anything to make nurses want to come there."

Workers at another HCA-owned facility, Riverside Community Hospital, voted earlier this week to authorize a strike there, Simon said.

Today, West Hills Hospital & Medical Center in the San Fernando Valley will vote whether to authorize a strike there as well, Simon said.

HCA has its own subsidiary, All About Staffing, set up about four years ago, which provides temporary staffing to its hospitals. In a story published last year in Modern Healthcare, HCA spokesman Jeff Prescott said the hospital system has focused on efficiency at its hospitals and uses daily productivity data to adjust staff levels to volume, balancing cost and quality.

Prescott did not return a phone call Wednesday seeking comment.