

Media Advisory for Tuesday, November 13, 2018

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L.A. COUNTY NURSES VOTE TO GO ON STRIKE AND SOUND THE ALARM ON THREATS TO PATIENT CARE

As Thanksgiving Holiday Approaches, Nurses Authorize Strike with a Resounding 98% Vote in Favor; 7,000+ Nurses Set to Strike for Better Patient Care, Citing Dangerous Violations of Patient-Nurse Ratios and a Chronic Retention Crisis in Busiest ERs and Trauma Centers

LOS ANGELES, CA—More than 7,000 Registered Nurses at flagship public hospitals and clinics across LA County's 4,751-square-mile service area are sounding the alarm on threats to patient care by voting to go on an Unfair Labor Practice strike that could start as early as Thanksgiving Day. The Nurses, represented by SEIU 721, will deliver an official strike authorization notice directly to the LA County Board of Supervisors.

WHO: Striking Nurses of LA County

WHAT: Press Conference Announcing LA County Nurses' Strike

WHEN: Tuesday, November 13, 2018 at 12:00 PM

WHERE: LA County Board of Supervisors Meeting Room
500 W. Temple St. (at Temple St. and Grand Ave.)
Los Angeles, CA 90012

LA County Registered Nurses form part of a highly skilled set of health care providers at the County's extensive public hospital and clinic network and are vital to the health of 11 million people in LA County. Unfortunately, the Department of Health Services is continually failing to retain these nurses; between fiscal year 2016 and fiscal year 2018 alone, 1,671 RNs vacated their County position, taking critical years of training experience at the expense of public tax dollars with them. The impact of the revolving door is evident in key departments, including the County's Emergency Rooms, where RNs handle more than 300,000 ER visits annually. As an example, in the last three years while LAC+USC Medical Center's ER department hired 100 new RNs, it also lost 66 RNs in that same period. The revolving door robs patients of experienced care and saddles experienced RNs with the unsustainable burden of simultaneously being responsible for saving lives while training new staff around-the-clock.

"The chronic retention crisis is at the heart of this strike because it directly impacts patient care," said Bob Schoonover, President of SEIU 721. "Instead of investing in the retention of experienced Nurses, management continually relies on band-aid remedies that jeopardize patient care and only prolong the pain – like over reliance on Nurse registries and shifting high-need patients to beds where they won't receive the intensive care they need. If it weren't for our Nurses sounding the alarm, these conditions would continue indefinitely. Instead of doing the right thing, management at LA County has chosen to break labor laws – particularly California's Title 22, which establishes Nurse-to-Patient Ratios. Those ratios exist to keep patients safe and our Nurses are determined to make sure they're enforced."

The move to reject LA County's last, best and final offer comes after LA County refused to bargain over staffing violations and instead of valuing RNs it insisted on contract take-aways from a workforce already spread thin. LA County will now be given a ten-day notice in anticipation of a strike that could start as early as Thursday, November 22 – Thanksgiving Day.

"The last thing we want to do is leave our patients' bedsides but we're ready to walk the picket line because patient safety is on the line," said Ileana Meza, a Registered Nurse at the LAC+USC Medical Center who also serves as

the Chair of Bargaining Units which represent LA County Nurses. “Management clearly has no problem with more than 11,000 patients leaving LA County ERs without receiving any treatment – in just one year alone. Management clearly has no problem with keeping more than 1,000 RN positions empty – even though the Board of Supervisors allocated plenty of money to fill every single post. Management clearly has no problem with more than two thirds of our ICU beds remaining empty – as long as they can keep moving high-need patients to lower-need beds without anyone noticing. Well, we the Nurses of LA County have noticed. We have a problem with it. And we won’t stand for it. Someone has to stand up for patient care. That’s exactly what we intend to do and we won’t stop until LA County management puts patients first.”

The current contract for SEIU 721 Registered Nurses in Bargaining Units 311 and 312 expired in September and has been temporarily extended since then. SEIU 721 has filed charges with the Employee Relations Commission, claiming that LA County broke labor laws during negotiations by engaging in regressive bargaining, among other violations. The Registered Nurses voted to authorize a strike because the County refuses to bargain over this issue.

BACKGROUND: Registered Nurses of LA County have voted to strike over persistent, unaddressed threats to patient care. Examples include the following:

- **Nurses report long waits and systemic inefficiencies due to LA County’s inability to retain nurses. In 2016, more than 11,000 patients left the ERs of three LA County hospitals without receiving any care** – the LAC+USC Medical Center in Boyle Heights, the Olive View-UCLA Medical Center in Sylmar and the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance, according to the Office of Statewide Planning Health and Development. Of these, nearly half – or 5,042 patients – left the LAC+USC Medical Center having received no medical treatment at all.
- **Nurses report being assigned unsafe Nurse-to-Patient Ratios, and being forced to make patients’ care decisions based on staffing resources instead of patient needs.** On average, Los Angeles County is **only staffing to 57% of its licensed Intensive Care Unit (ICU) bed capacity.** The rest of their bed capacity remains “closed” regardless of patient need due to a lack of Nurses needed to fully staff all beds. The high number of “closed” bed capacity is troubling given that LA County is such a pivotal part of the region’s trauma care system. ICU beds remain unstaffed – even though funding is plentiful – as **management refuses to fill Nurse vacancies, opting instead to jeopardize patient safety by moving high-need patients to beds with lower levels of care.**
- **Nurses report missing lunch breaks and being told they cannot call out sick. LA County management has simply not filled over 1,000 Registered Nurse job openings – even though the Board of Supervisors already budgeted taxpayer funds for all of these positions.**
- **Ambulances from hospitals run by LA County’s Department of Health Service as are routinely diverted 15% of the time** – a much higher rate than the statewide average of just over five percent.
- **Meanwhile, the vast majority of new Registered Nurses leave chronically understaffed LA County hospitals within the first five years of employment. From Fiscal Year 2015-2016 to Fiscal Year 2017-2018, 771 Nurses left LA County employment.** The revolving door of Nurses continues spinning indefinitely, leaving LA County’s busiest ERs and trauma centers permanently staffed with the least seasoned nurses as the few experienced RNs who do remain are continually training new staff while fulfilling their daily tasks.

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