

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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## **NURSES SOUND ALARM ON LA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES' REFUSAL TO RELEASE STOCKPILE OF N95 MASKS NEEDED TO PROTECT MEDICAL PERSONNEL**

*NURSES FILE COMPLAINT WITH CAL/OSHA; NURSES WARN LA COUNTY'S HOARDING OF MASKS AND FAILURE TO PROVIDE FRONTLINE WORKERS WITH CRITICAL EQUIPMENT RISKS PUBLIC HEALTH AND ALL BUT GUARANTEES SPREAD OF COVID-19 AMONG PATIENTS & HOSPITAL STAFF*

(LOS ANGELES, CA) – LA County frontline healthcare workers represented by SEIU 721 are sounding the alarm and alerting the public about the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services' refusal to release necessary protective equipment in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Registered Nurses across LA County are being asked to reuse masks and are being denied access to N95 respirators, which are mandated by the state's Aerosol Transmissible Diseases (ATD) standard for airborne infectious diseases like the novel Coronavirus.

SEIU 721 has met with County health officials on multiple occasions where they have claimed to have amassed a stockpile of the N95s. Yet, despite these claims, officials have refused to release the masks to ensure frontline healthcare workers can protect themselves, other medical personnel and other patients.

It is our union's position that much is still unclear about this virus and that the LA County DHS should err on the side of caution when it comes to ensuring that the critical workforce of nurses is protected so they can stay healthy and be able to tend to thousands of patients in the weeks to come when the public will need nurses more than ever.

"It is utterly disappointing that LA County would put frontline healthcare workers like myself in this kind of danger when it's precisely in times like these that we desperately need all medical staff in top condition," said Cynthia Mitchel, a Supervising Registered Nurse at LAC+USC. "We're experiencing a worldwide health crisis like we've never seen before and instead of being proactive, the County is setting us up to become super spreaders while the Coronavirus is brewing in our hospitals."

In light of the County's refusal to comply with the ATD standard, SEIU 721 has filed a complaint on behalf of the County healthcare workers it represents with the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) with demands that the County immediately investigate the imminent hazard to health and safety of workers and the community.

Our union has also made a clear demand for the County to cease and desist from assigning suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases to our members unless or until the County can provide proper personal protective equipment that complies with the ATD standard, including N95 respirators. Until the County provides proper personal protective equipment, individual healthcare professionals may choose to refuse unsafe work assignments.

Cal/OSHA has the authority to enforce these protections at LA County hospitals. Nurses and healthcare workers across LA County – the largest county in the United States of America with a population larger than 41 states in the union – are asking Cal/OSHA to investigate the union's complaint and enforce the ATD standard. Cal/OSHA's action is critical to ensure that healthcare workers are provided with proper protective equipment to provide safe patient care and prevent further spread of the virus.

According to a study published in *The Lancet*, 20 percent of Italian healthcare workers on the front lines of the outbreak became infected. In China, more than 3,350 healthcare workers were infected.

"The County is saying they will release the masks later but that's like trying to conserve water when a fire needs to be put out and at LA County we already see the smoke," Mitchel said. "If we use the N95 masks we have now, we won't need as many down the line. The County's logic doesn't make sense and their decision to keep a stockpile of N95s in a closet somewhere instead of on the faces of the nurses who urgently need them is putting our entire community at risk."

SEIU 721 is also documenting reports from members about a lack of proper training, protocols and other protective equipment such as gloves, surgical masks and gowns. We demand that the County reconsider its position on personal protective equipment and partner with us to find solutions to protect the health and safety of healthcare professionals and the public during this critical time.

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