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SEIU Local 721 President Calls on Gov. Newsom to Protect Healthcare Workers After the Release of Dangerous COVID-19 Guidance Allowing Hospitals, Other Health Facilities to Force Infected Staff Back to Work

The union demands isolation and testing for infected healthcare workers, common-sense measures to help with the current staffing crisis, investments in recruitment and retention of health staff, and COVID-19 supplemental paid sick leave for all workers.

CALIFORNIA – In a letter to Gov. Gavin Newsom sent January 13, SEIU Local 721 President David Green sounded the alarm about a dangerous new state health guidance permitting hospitals and other healthcare facilities to force COVID-positive staff who are asymptomatic back to work without isolation periods or testing.

Under the new guidelines, which are in effect until Feb. 1, health facilities facing staffing shortages can require doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers to return to work immediately after testing positive for COVID-19 if they are asymptomatic. The returning workers must wear N95 masks and should “preferably be assigned to work with COVID-19 positive patients,” the [guidance](#) says.

“This guidance endangers healthcare workers across the state, including the thousands of nurses, clinic workers, and other frontline healthcare professionals in Southern California who are SEIU 721 members,” says Green, in his letter to Gov. Newsom.

Green’s letter comes after nurses with SEIU 721 [spoke out](#) this week against the new state guidance — which comes as hospitals, clinics, and other facilities face an unprecedented wave of patients infected with COVID-19 as the highly infectious Omicron variant rips through California. According to recent reports, private hospitals in LA County have been turning away patients due to capacity issues, straining public hospitals that are already facing rampant staffing shortages because of COVID-19 infections among workers.

“Now is not the time to scale back measures that contain COVID-19’s spread in our healthcare facilities and to force workers who are already strained to put their colleagues and patients at risk,” Green writes.

****Green and healthcare workers represented by SEIU 721 will be available for comment today about the letter to Gov. Newsom and the recent state health guidance. Contact Roxane Marquez at 213-705-1078 for more information. ****

Green’s letter points to safe measures that can help health facilities handle their current staffing shortages, including cancelling non-critical healthcare procedures and elective surgeries and tightening controls on visitation. “Most importantly,” Green writes, “it is time to invest in California’s healthcare facilities and fund efforts to recruit and retain full-time healthcare workers to weather this crisis and future ones.”

Green adds: "For too long, the hospitals and clinics our members work in have been short-handed, with administrators trying to save money by contracting out vital services to private corporations and relying on tools like nurse registries and traveling nurses. The COVID-19 pandemic, including the Omicron wave, has shown that these practices are no substitute for having an adequate number of fairly compensated professional healthcare staff who are treated with dignity and respect and who are not expected to overwork themselves or operate in unsafe conditions when patient intake is high."

Green's letter also calls for COVID supplemental paid sick leave for all workers — a move that would help to reduce the Omicron variant's rapid spread that is leading to the surge in cases and patients requiring hospitalization.

The letter to Gov. Newsom ends with testimonials from healthcare staff who are members of SEIU 721:

Dr. Ileana Meza, a registered nurse practitioner at LAC + USC Medical Center: "At LAC-USC, the largest public hospital in LA, our staffing levels are low because many of my colleagues are out sick with Omicron. Some patients are waiting 20 hours to be seen in the emergency room. The solution to this is not forcing infected workers back into our hospital and into other health facilities, increasing the risk of spread. It's taking common-sense steps like cancelling non-critical healthcare procedures and elective surgeries, reducing face-to-face visits of a routine or annual nature to telehealth, tightening controls on visitation, and investing in the recruitment and retention of healthcare workers."

Bruce Campbell, Clinical Laboratory Scientist at Riverside University Health System: "We've got to plan ahead and make sure our future is secured. The surge caused by the Omicron variant shows short-staffing and relying on tools like nurse registries and traveling nurses leaves health facilities vulnerable. It's time to start investing in the recruitment and retention of healthcare workers so we can handle the current crisis and future ones. Forcing healthcare workers to return to work infected with COVID-19 only puts patients and fellow staff at risk."

Rene Espinosa, Nursing Assistant II at Ventura County Medical Center: "We are seeing a huge number of patients because of the Omicron wave that is causing strain on our staff. One thing that would help reduce the community spread that is driving this: COVID supplemental paid sick leave for all workers. This move would allow infected workers, including health staff, to fully recover from the virus and be confident they are not spreading it to others on the job."

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