

# **SEIU Healthcare Wisconsin: Frontline nurses and caregivers to testify at first hearing of Dane County Healthcare and Public Health Workforce Needs Subcommittee**

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Madison, WI- On Tuesday, July 5 at 5:30 pm, frontline nurses and caregivers will testify at the first hearing of the Dane County Healthcare and Public Health Workforce Needs Subcommittee. They will be describing their dramatic firsthand experiences providing care during the pandemic, and how Covid severely aggravated systemic problems in the healthcare system including dangerous understaffing and turnover leading to a crisis of worker shortages and trauma. The hearing [agenda](#) can be found here.

Colin Gillis, a registered nurse and care team leader on a Covid unit at UW Health, will deliver testimony that states:

“Caring for Covid patients during the pandemic has been one of the most meaningful experiences in my life because my coworkers and I have been able to save the lives of many members of our community. But it has also been one of the most traumatic times of my life. When Covid first hit, entering rooms with inadequate protection against a disease about which we knew very little was terrifying. Caring for Covid patients at the bedside has really taken a toll on me and my coworkers. Patients deteriorated rapidly and the virus spread like wildfire through families. I remember one night we had to take a Covid patient down to the ICU to say goodbye to his son, who was dying from the same disease and which he had likely gotten from close contact with his father. Other patients loudly denied the

existence of the virus, right up until the point they were intubated for respiratory failure as a result of Covid pneumonia. Meanwhile, families often directed their anger at us nurses for enforcing policies prohibiting visitors for Covid patients. All of these experiences were made worse by chronic understaffing and the lack of a voice in decision making. Every day, the hospital administration would announce new policies and procedures, but these were seldom developed in consultation with us, the frontline workers. This was profoundly disempowering and demoralizing. The pandemic caused me severe psychological distress and many of my coworkers report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. For all of these reasons, I strongly support the devotion of significant resources toward the creation of a program designed to address healthcare workforce trauma, wellness, recruitment, retention, training, and continuing education as soon as possible.”

Wisconsin has been facing a spiraling healthcare workforce shortage and could have nearly [23,000 empty nursing positions](#) by 2040. In January of this year, SEIU Healthcare Wisconsin conducted a professional poll of 920 Dane County healthcare workers which quantitatively reinforced their lived experiences and had alarming findings, including: 90% of healthcare workers believe understaffing is having a major negative impact on their patients; 86% have experienced stress or trauma during the pandemic; 85% feel like they're working in a war zone; 82% have considered leaving the field and/or know a co-worker who has; 69% say there has been a negative impact on family and personal relationships; 19% know a healthcare worker who has considered suicide; and 97% support the creation of a program to address the crisis.

In May, the Health and Human Needs Committee of the Dane County Board of Supervisors created the Healthcare and Public Health Workforce Needs Subcommittee. The subcommittee brings together stakeholders to assess the needs and problems facing the healthcare workforce and recommend solutions that will promote recruitment, retention, training, and the mental health and well-being of frontline workers. The effort is likely the first of its kind, and could serve as a trailblazing model throughout the state and nation.

The subcommittee includes Supervisor Mike Bare, Chair; Supervisor Kierstin Huelsemann, Vice Chair; Supervisor Holly Hatcher; Pat Raes, Registered Nurse at Meriter Hospital and President, SEIU Healthcare Wisconsin; Tami Burns, Registered Nurse, UW Health; Tatiana Smith, Certified Nursing Assistant, Oakwood Village; Patti Becker, Director of Program Operations, Community Living Alliance; Dr. Gene Musser, MD, Member of the Dane County Board of Health and Wisconsin Medical

Society; Kerri Kliminski, Chair, Nursing Department, Madison College; Dr. Nainika Nanda, MD, Dane County Medical Society; Dr. John Beasley, MD, Dane County Medical Society; Tim Conroy, Executive Director, Capitol Lakes Retirement Community; and Dr. Mark Huth, MD, President and CEO of Group Health Cooperative of South Central Wisconsin.

The subcommittee will hold a series of meetings and report their recommendations for a program to the Health and Human Needs Committee of the Dane County Board at its August 11 meeting.