

UW Health nurses call for union recognition on Labor Day

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UW Health nurses argue patient care is suffering as fewer and less experienced nurses are being asked to shoulder a greater burden.

Speaking over the weekend at a news conference organized by advocates for unionization, UW Health nurse Shari Signer said cuts to staffing ratios and benefits as well as nurse training hours have strained an already dwindling workforce. Over 1,500 UW Health nurses have indicated support for forming a union, according to a release from SEIU Health Care Wisconsin.

“Now our new nurses are thrown in with a full load, and if they need help, odds are they have no one to turn to other than another new nurse because so many experienced nurses have left UW,” Signer said. “This is not right. It’s not right for new nurses, it’s not right for experienced nurses. Most importantly, it is not right for our patients.”

Nurses on Friday gave official notice of plans to strike from 7 a.m. Sept. 13 to 7 a.m. Sept. 16. SEIU Healthcare Wisconsin says a “strong majority” of nurses employed by UW Health are calling for union recognition from hospital leadership. A previous union contract with SEIU expired in 2014, the release shows.

But UW Health says it’s uncertain whether the health system can engage in collective bargaining under the state’s Act 10 law, arguing the planned strike will put patients at risk.

Attorney General Josh Kaul has issued an opinion saying while UW Health isn’t required to engage in union discussions, it can do so. But the health system points to differing opinions from the Wisconsin Legislative Council, Legislative Reference Bureau, and internal and external legal counsel.

In a statement in late August, UW Health said the planned strike “will be unpleasant for patients and for our staff, but we will get through it and never lose sight of our shared mission to meet the needs of our patients.”

SEIU Healthcare Wisconsin President Pat Raes said some people believe the push for unionization only seeks to improve wages and benefits for nurses.

“That’s not the case,” she said. “More importantly, nurses advocate daily, hourly and every minute for our patients. And forming a union gives us the right to advocate better.”

She pointed to studies showing nursing homes with union workers have lower rates of COVID-19 infection, while acute care hospitals with nursing unions have a higher nurse-to-patient ratio, leading to better health outcomes.

Several Dem lawmakers spoke in support of the nurses seeking union representation, including U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan of the Town of Vermont and Reps. Francesca Hong of Madison and Dianne Hesselbein of Middleton.

Watch a video of the news conference here:

<https://www.facebook.com/SEIUHCWI/videos/509618591171690>

-By Alex Moe