

Riverside, California Nurses strike continues as ICU beds reach capacity

By Kevin Martinez
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Nurses at the Riverside Community Hospital in California continued their strike this week over inadequate staffing and lack of protective equipment. The strike comes at a time when Coronavirus cases are surging throughout the state and especially Riverside County, where health officials declared this week that Intensive Care Units (ICU's) were at near capacity.

At the picket lines, nurses told reporters that they have been unable to give patients the best care because the hospital has not provided them with the necessary help and equipment. Registered nurse Mary Martin said, "When I say I work 13 hours and I don't get a drink of water, I'm not exaggerating. And, you know, I'm almost 52 years old and I'm a strong lady but I'm not that strong anymore," adding, "It breaks my heart. The things sometimes that I see I can leave in tears. I have left in tears."

Chronic under staffing will only get worse for nurses as this week California reported a record number of new cases in one day with more than 8,000. Statewide, there have been 6,000 reported coronavirus-related deaths. Infections are increasing not just in the urban areas, but also in the northern and inland counties. Public health experts warn that the state is not experiencing a second wave but has failed to curb the first wave.

In Los Angeles, county officials stated they may run out of hospital beds for COVID-19 patients in two to three weeks. The upcoming Fourth of July weekend may spread the disease even more as L.A. County has shut down its beaches and banned fireworks displays. Governor Gavin Newsom announced new restrictions and blamed the population for not following social distancing and wearing masks.

Rather than prepare for the flood of patients, HCA Healthcare has threatened to layoff ten percent of its

nurses unless they agree to wage freezes, the elimination of company contributions to pensions and other cuts. The SEIU's decision to only call a strike at one hospital instead of a system-wide HCA strike has helped the health care giant bring in outside staff and traveling nurses to fill the schedule, while blaming striking nurses for worsening conditions at the hospitals.

On Monday, Riverside County health officials announced that ICU beds were almost at 99 percent capacity. Riverside Community Hospital's CMO, Dr. Saba Habis, told the media that of the hospital's 69 ICU beds, 62 were occupied, and a third of those were coronavirus patients.

Dr. Habis then blamed the nurses saying, "It's just unfortunate that we're having a strike and folks are out versus caring for the patients." He went on to say that the hospital had been following all CDC guidelines concerning PPE and patient safety.

Joyce Cardenas, a nurse at HCA hospital, told local media, "I am responsible for 11 different nurses on two different floors on two different units. How am I supposed to relieve breaks and help them without the proper staffing? If there's a code blue in one unit and I'm covering a thirty-minute lunch, I'm not available, I can't help. That's not right.

"We've asked again and again and again to give us the staffing, to give us the resources that we deserve and we have been shut down. So, we are asking the community, the public, to come out here to strike with us to show HCA that we deserve better. Nurses are heroes and we need to save lives. We are tired of working for 12 hours with the same mask, if we get them. Enough is enough."

Across the state, the pandemic is rapidly unfolding into an unmitigated crisis. The time bought from social

distancing measures were squandered as privately run hospitals cut expenses and the state failed to acquire anywhere near the necessary personal protective equipment and contact tracing necessary to contain an outbreak.

Prisons are emerging as a hotbed of the disease as more than a thousand prisoners were infected at San Quentin after a group of infected prisoners were transferred from a jail in Chino. Gov. Newsom announced plans to grant early release to a mere 3,500 prisoners who are close to finishing their sentences from California's unconstitutionally overcrowded prison system. As of June 10, the state's prisons were at 125.7 percent of capacity creating conditions for a rapid spread of disease. Newsom said that almost 2,600 of the state's 113,000 prisoners tested positive for COVID-19.

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