

Good morning, my name is Maureen Casey I am an Executive Board Member of SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania the largest nurses union in the state. I have been a registered nurse at Hershey for the last 16 years - working at the bedside, delivering quality patient care.

Pennsylvania is facing a catastrophic staffing crisis in hospitals. Unsafe staffing puts all our lives at risk - patients and staff alike. When hospitals are understaffed, patients suffer. Unsafe staffing results in more infections, falls, re-admissions, failures to rescue, heart attacks, errors, and deaths in hospitals, as well as longer ER wait times and lengths of stay.

To address this crisis, the legislature must do two things (as we have done here at Hershey): invest in frontline caregivers and improve patient care standards.

At Hershey Medical Center, Penn State Health has made critical workforce investments over the last several decades that have made it a quality healthcare facility. First and foremost, our staff have a union that gives nurses a voice with our employer and has created the footing for a deep partnership to improve patient care.

Since the first whiff of the pandemic, our union nurses began meeting with the hospital almost daily to review training, PPE, preparations and any upcoming plans that affect nursing and patient care. We are able to collaborate with the hospital to bring our perspective from the bedside. Beyond the pandemic, our hospital has invested in staffing committees with minimum staffing standards that ensure that we are able to provide quality patient care around the clock.

But nurses at other facilities across the state are not so fortunate. For example, I spoke to a nurse who works at a rural hospital in central PA where the employer was totally unprepared for the wave of COVID patients and nurses are still being assigned anywhere from 6 to 9 COVID patients at a time. Patients are left for hours untreated in the hallways of the hospital and patient outcomes have plummeted. They are not alone. All across Pennsylvania: experienced staff are leaving their community hospitals to work in travel or other settings because of the continued short staffing and dangerous conditions.

Temporary nurse staffing can be a necessary tool for short-term workforce shortages. However, hospitals are increasingly reliant on subcontracted agency nurses as a cost-cutting strategy. This has resulted in increased staff turnover, eroded collective bargaining units, and has negatively impacted the quality and consistency of patient care with fewer veteran nurses at the bedside and fewer stable jobs in Pennsylvania communities. When temporary nurses are compensated at rates 25 percent to 40 percent above the nurses they're working alongside, it is clear to see why so many nurses are leaving their local hospital to travel.

Paying nurses more is part of the solution: we must invest in retaining qualified staff. But investment alone is insufficient unless we also address unsafe staffing. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Health's "Pulse of Pennsylvania's Registered Nurse Workforce," unsafe staffing is the single greatest source of job dissatisfaction and burnout among nurses.

Passing safe staffing standards into law across the state will not only save lives and improve patient care, it will also bring more nurses to and keep them at the bedside for longer.

What the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated is that frontline healthcare workers who have been at the bedside need to be at the table where decisions are being made, and legislation must be passed to improve patient care in PA hospitals. When it comes to solving the nurse workforce crisis, nurses have made it clear: We want our frontline voices to be respected, and we want to see safer staffing standards passed in our Pennsylvania legislature.