

Nurses Reject Contract Offer

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PITTSFIELD — Registered nurses at Berkshire Health Systems have rejected a contract the company called its "best and final offer."

Of the 495 Massachusetts Nurses Association members eligible to vote on the contract offer, 405 voted against it, or 82 percent, according to union spokesman David Schildmeier.

The union represents about 800 registered nurses employed at Berkshire Medical Center; 616 are voting members.

The vote follows eight months of contract negotiations, and more than 20 bargaining sessions, between the nurses union and Berkshire Health Systems, which operates the medical center.

The parties are at odds over salaries, the number of patients nurses are required to care for at once, and a number of other points.

The rejected contract had been proposed publicly last month by Berkshire Health Systems as its "best and final offer."

"We are all disappointed," said Brenda Cadorette, chief nursing officer and a registered nurse at BMC. "We have been bargaining in good faith. I think these are fair proposals; it is equitable and fair."

As a member of management, Cadorette is not represented by the nurses union, and was speaking on behalf of BHS.

Cadorette and Arthur Milano, vice president of human resources at BHS, said much of its contract proposal was based on requests from nurses during bargaining sessions. He said those contract additions include changes to staffing participation and 10 percent raises over three years.

Schildmeier said nurses are eager to get back to the negotiating table and added that they intend to propose a number of dates to resume talks with administrators.

"We want to reach a fair and equitable settlement," he said. "What they put out on the table is not at all supported by the nurses."

Milano said only time will tell what happens next.

"Given what we have done, what we have been through, there is not a lot else that we can do," he said. "So we will just have to see where this takes us."

Contract proposals to date

The hospital has proposed a total of a 10 percent wage increase over three years, with a 1 percent increase the first two years and 2 percent in the third year.

The nurses are seeking a one-year contract with a 3.5 percent wage increase. That includes a 1.5 percent wage increase, retroactive from when negotiations began in September, and an additional 2 percent as of June 1, for a total of 3.5 percent, Schildmeier said.

“We have also indicated that this is not our bottom line on wages,” he said. “There is room for negotiation.”

Additionally, the health system’s proposal includes annual 2 percent step increases for those within the wage scale, lump sum payments of 2 percent annually for those at the top of the pay scale, and increases to evening and night shift payment differentials.

Regarding health insurance, the hospital wants to change the nurses' payment from 10 percent to 20 percent, which it said would bring payments in line with all of its other employees. The plan does not have a deductible and has low, or no, co-pays.

But nurse union representatives have said the nurses already pay more than some for health insurance. And they said doctors and managers pay between 40 and 70 percent less than nurses for family health insurance plans.

Staffing disagreements

Nurses also said they are being asked to care for too many people at once, which increases the risk that something could go wrong with patient care. They said they have repeatedly requested additional staff.

Hospital officials said staff has been added: 200 employees following the closure of North Adams Regional Hospital in March 2014, 60 of whom were nurses.

They say the union's approach is too rigid, and they noted staffing guidelines at the hospital are appropriate and meet the best practices of the American Nursing Association.

In the BHS proposal, administrators are holding to nursing association guidelines, but they have agreed to allow for increased direct participation by nursing staff.

The contract also would allow nurses to be involved in staffing decisions and it would include a response system for nurses to report temporary staffing shortages.

Nurses want contracts changed to include the number of patients they are expected to care for at one time, a move the union has lobbied for elsewhere in the state.

Hospital leaders said the union is pushing a statewide agenda for mandatory, fixed staffing ratios that has little to do with local needs, a charge nurses have said is "completely false."

Union representatives have said the top priorities for bargaining were decided among its Pittsfield members. Those priorities are staffing guidelines, health insurance and salary.

A private, nonprofit, Berkshire Health Systems' affiliates include Berkshire Medical Center, the BMC Hillcrest Campus, Fairview Hospital in Great Barrington, the North Adams Campus of BMC, Berkshire Visiting Nurse Association, BHS physician practices, and Berkshire Healthcare Systems, which provides long-term care for the elderly.

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