

Why BMC nurses could not return to work on Wednesday morning

On Wednesday morning, the day after the one-day strike by BMC nurses, RNs attempted to enter Berkshire Medical Center to begin their shifts. The Massachusetts Nurses Association – which authorized the strike at our community hospital - had alerted the media that the nurses would return to the hospital so that photographers would be on the scene to capture images of nurses being turned away.

It is unfortunate that the MNA staged such an obvious publicity stunt. When the nurses voted for a one-day strike, BMC had only two options: close for the day or find other nurses to care for our patients. Obviously, we could not close. Thus, like other hospitals in Massachusetts this summer, we engaged the services of a staffing agency for five days to care for our patients.

All Registered Nurses at BMC had been informed multiple times that this would be the case. Their union, which has led two other strikes in the state this summer, also knew that nurses would not be able to return to BMC for a total of five days. In fact, the entire BMC community was notified by letter on July 5 that the hospital would be obliged to spend millions to hire contract nurses for five days if the BMC nurses voted for a one-day strike.

That's because there is no RN staffing agency in the nation that will send hundreds of nurses to a hospital for only one day. The minimum length of time that a staffing agency will provide licensed and credentialed RNs to provide patient care while nurses are striking is determined by the size of the hospital and the complexity of care provided. For BMC, that determination was five days. It was the same at Tufts Medical Center in Boston, where the MNA staged a strike earlier this summer, and three days at Baystate Franklin in Greenfield, another site of an MNA strike.

Despite a summer of strikes, first-hand knowledge of staffing agency rules, and letters distributed to all RNs informing them of the procedure, the MNA still sent nurses back to BMC on Wednesday morning. We will welcome their return on Sunday morning, which will mark the end of the five-day period of care provided by the staffing agency.