

Berkshire ambulance agencies come out against Question 1



Dr. Michael McHugh, head of the emergency department at Berkshire Medical Center, speaks against Ballot Question 1. McHugh is joined by emergency medical providers from the entire county in protesting the legislation that would limit the patient to nurse ratio in the commonwealth.

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By Haven Orecchio-Egresitz , The Berkshire Eagle – November 1, 2018

PITTSFIELD — While on paper imposing patient limits for nurses may seem like a move to increase safety, in fact it will achieve the opposite, a slew of paramedics and emergency health care professionals said at a conference at County Ambulance Wednesday.

"If you read through this bill, you'll see that the devil is really in the details," Dr. Erryn Leinbaugh said at the news conference for No on 1.

If passed Nov. 6, Question 1 will impose hefty fines when nurses see more patients than imposed staffing ratios. Paramedics and emergency room doctors fear that if the limits are imposed, patients will be kept on stretchers in hospital ambulance bays until the staffing levels allow them to be treated.

Representatives from six Berkshire ambulance services and Berkshire Medical Center's two emergency rooms held a news conference at County Ambulance station on Dalton Avenue Wednesday.

"We say that patient safety is critical," said Bill Hathaway, of Southern Berkshire Volunteer Ambulance service. "What about the patients sitting in ambulances?"

The Southern Berkshire service is made up of six ambulances that take patients to Fairview Hospital's emergency room, which has eight beds.

After midnight, there is generally one doctor and two nurses on staff, Hathaway said.

If staffing ratios are imposed, and the two nurses are tied up with critical patients when there is a multivehicle collision, those patients could be forced to wait for attention, he said.

"I just don't see that happening. We're health care providers. It's our job to care for patients," Hathaway said.

Hospitals say that, if approved by voters, Question 1 would cost Massachusetts hospitals \$1.3 billion in the first year and \$900 million annually after that. Berkshire Medical Center would need to spend an additional \$23 million a year, according to David Phelps, its president and CEO.

If nurses chose to abandon ratios in order to care for critically injured patients, it can come at a cost for the hospitals: \$25,000 per instance. With that kind of increased financial burden, Berkshire Medical Center's satellite campus and emergency room in North Adams may not survive, according to Leinbaugh.

"I'd hate to see that close down," he said at the news conference. "That's a big concern of mine."

Kate Norton, spokeswoman for The Committee to Ensure Safe Patient Care which advocates to vote yes on the ballot initiative, said those concerns are "based in fiction" and are an attempt to scare people into voting no.

The question has gotten support from firefighter and emergency responder groups in other parts of the state, she said.

If the question passes, she said that hospitals will have to hire more nurses. In California, where a similar measure was passed in 2004, wait times in hospitals have gone down 47 percent, she said.

As for the situation at the Great Barrington hospital, staffing should never be that low, Norton said.

"That's not a safe scenario," she said of the low number of nurses staffed. "If you are a patient and you are in an emergency situation, you should receive the same standard of care no matter what emergency room you go to."

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