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Province-wide staffing crisis reaches Headwaters

By Sam Odrowski

A staffing crisis impacting hospitals across the province became increasingly apparent at Headwaters Health Care Centre over the August long weekend.

To address the immediate needs of the hospital, paramedics were brought in to help with patients in the Emergency Room (ER) and the COVID-19 Assessment Centre was closed to redeploy staff to other areas of the hospital. RPNs, ward clerks, registration staff, and screener/runner staff were also redeployed.

?There is a significant amount of planning and effort that occurs on a daily basis to ensure all our areas of service are appropriately staffed,? said Headwaters CEO Kim Delahunt. ?We recognize that there is a shortage being experienced in healthcare across the province, not just at Headwaters, and are doing everything we can to respond safely,?

Delahunt added that, ?At no time were patients or their care put at risk.?

However, emails obtained by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare from staff at Headwaters, which they represent, expressed concerns.

An email to Human Resources from a nurse, with the names redacted for privacy, indicated that there was a delay to the opening of the ICU on Saturday (July 31) night.

?There were patients that should have been admitted to ICU that were then admitted to the floors after staying in emerg [sic] for an extended period of time and added more stress to the floors,? the email stated.

It went on to note that supervisors with no nursing experience, who cannot relate to the stress nurses are experiencing, expect them to work in areas they're unfamiliar, and admit patients to certain floors that are unsafe for them.

?Floors continue to go over census which create unsafe workloads and staffing to patient ratios and creates a higher risk for errors, and IT IS OUR LICENSE ON THE LINE; not the HSC [Hospital Services Coordinator], not the managers, and not yours ? it's mine,? the email reads.

Although, these types of problems aren't unique to Headwaters, there's currently a province wide nursing shortage, which is leaving those left in the profession severely overworked and burnt out.

During COVID-19 many nurses retired and some quit due to the added stress.

?We've been ringing the alarm bells for quite a while now,? said Sharleen Stewart, SEIU Healthcare President. ?There was an issue with retention and recruitment in all healthcare, pre-COVID, but of course, now, 18 months later, we're seeing real crisis evolve with not only, recruiting healthcare workers, but retaining them.?

SEIU Healthcare, which represents over 60,000 community and healthcare workers across Ontario, has continuously received messages from the workers they represent expressing concerns about their work environment.

?They're worried and they're terrified about the strain that this this crisis is putting on them and their co-workers. I mean, it's dangerous, the working conditions right now, but also the fact that there's not enough [staff] to even provide proper care inside some

of these facilities,? Stewart told the Free Press.

?These workers are mentally and physically exhausted, so many of them are experiencing PTSD, and to put that pressure on them to come in for extended shifts, some of them are working 12 hour shifts and they stay to work another eight-hour shift ? that is bad for everybody, including, most importantly too, is the patients that they're taking care of."

One thing that is desperately needed, according to Stewart, is mental health support for healthcare staff. Currently, none is available and won't be any time soon as the Ford government's Bill 124 limits all public sector wage increases to one per cent. The one per cent increase includes any services for staff that would cost money, such as counselling. As well, the bill limits any form of negotiation, which has brought about many constitutional challenges.

?[Healthcare staff] are having to take care of themselves and refusing shifts, they have to, because they know that they are in a very dangerous situation if they don't and care about number one, their licenses,? Stewart said. ?For the regulated staff, they're responsible to ensure that safe care is provided to the patients. When you're doing extended shifts for an extended period of time, that just screams problems, so they're not risking that anymore.?

Some nurses and other healthcare staff are quitting as they see no end in sight to the current staffing crisis, according to Stewart, which only adds to the problem.

To help bring more people into the healthcare profession, Stewart said Bill 124 needs to be repealed so unions can negotiate freely and get fair wages for Registered Practical Nurses (RPN) who receive 30-40 per cent less money than Registered Nurses (RN).

With the current pay increases for Personal Support Workers (PSWs) which Premiere Doug Ford said his government plans to make permanent, the wage of an RPN becomes very close to that of a PSW.

?When it comes to RPNs they absolutely have got a real pay problem there,? said Stewart. ?They are so far behind the RNs and they have to address that. That's been a long-standing issue."

?Registered practical nurses now have got the skill base of a registered nurse like they can do? up to 90 per cent of the registered nurses work under their licenses,? she added.

Rallies have been held at hospitals across Ontario, including Headwaters, protesting Bill 124 and calling on hospital CEOs to do the same.

Going forward, Stewart SEIU Healthcare will continue to advocate for better working conditions for healthcare workers, fair wages, and proper support, such as mental health counselling.