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Nurses say changes at hospital are negatively affecting patient care

Officials at Providence St. Joseph Medical Center say facility's staffing levels meet state guidelines.

BY ANTHONY CLARK CARPIO

Some registered nurses at Providence St. Joseph Medical Center are concerned about a recent procedural change they say is already having negative consequences for patients.

Members from SEIU Local 121RN's, St. Joe's chapter, spoke during a Burbank City Council meeting last week, saying shift cuts made at the hospital mean there are now fewer nurses to assist patients on each shift.

Before July, each hospital floor would have three certified nursing assistants, or CNAs, for every 24 patients. However, union members said management decided to change that model, which now allows three CNAs for every 30 patients, said Lou Bautista, a registered nurse at Providence St. Joseph, during the meeting.

Bautista, who has been working at the Burbank hospital for eight years, said she and her colleagues were already stretched thin before the change was made.

With the new policy, Bautista said it is more difficult for her and her fellow nurses to provide the high level of care for which Providence St. Joseph is known.

"Our certified nursing assistants are our backbone," she said. "So without them, we're pretty much stuck, and it's detrimental to all nurses working on the floor."

Joyce Powell, union chapter president at St. Joseph and an emergency room registered nurse at the hospital, said on Monday that the staffing change is a safety concern for not only the patients but for the nurses themselves.

She said that, because of a heavier workload, registered nurses and certified nursing assistants have been scrambling from patient to patient, and at times responding to calls late.

"There's a lot of work that the certified nursing assistants and nurses do up there, and these cuts put the patients at a risk," Powell said.

Bautista said last week that the change has already affected her. Just a few weeks ago, Bautista was notified to help a patient go to the restroom, but she was already tending to another patient with an intravenous medication.

While tied up with her current patient, the certified nursing

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assistant who was supposed to help Bautista with the patient who needed to go to the restroom was also busy, giving another patient a bath.

In addition to that, the other certified nursing assistant was clocked out for lunch.

Eventually, Bautista was able to help the patient who had been waiting for a while, but they had already soiled themselves.

"It's horrid to have somebody go through that," Bautista said. "She was very upset and wondered why it took so long for someone to give her assistance. All I could do was apologize as I was cleaning her up."

Officials from Providence St. Joseph Medical Center issued a statement on Friday saying that the hospital devotes resources to comply with safe staffing levels under the state's nurse staffing laws and guidelines.

"We design and adjust staffing models to best meet the needs of our community," said Patricia Aidem, spokeswoman for Providence St. Joseph Medical Center, in the statement. "The issue raised by SEIU is a staffing and scheduling change that is specifically

permitted by our union contract."

Aidem added that management is currently in labor negotiations with SEIU, whose contract ends on Dec. 31.

Although hospital officials say they are dedicated to providing high-quality care for patients, Bautista and Powell said they think otherwise.

In addition to not addressing the calls from some patients on time, Powell said she and some of her colleagues are worried about fatigued nurses and nursing assistants who could injure themselves while on the job.

She said that because of the increased workload, some nurses are not taking their required breaks because they are tied up assisting multiple patients.

"Unfortunately, there's only so many hands to help the people that come through St. Joseph," Powell said.

What she, Bautista and other nurses at Providence St. Joseph want is for management to reverse the staffing changes so that the level of service can go back to what it was before.

"It takes a team to provide care, but we can't do that if they're cutting our team members," Powell said.

For questions or more information,
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