



Linda Morales, left, union representative for the California Nurses Association, goes over material for a National Nurses Organizing Committee meeting with Joanne Guimond-Thompson, a Houston nurse.
GARY FOUNTAIN: FOR THE CHRONICLE

NURSING NUMBERS

- **89,000:** staff nurses in Texas
- **20,600:** staff nurses in Harris, Galveston and Brazoria counties
- **70,000:** California Nurses Association estimated membership
- **127:** union nurses who work for the Harris County Hospital District

Sources: American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, California Nurses Association

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California union courts Houston-area nurses

Organization stirs up interest in some; others wary

By L.M. SIXEL
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They're not fighting about wages. They aren't complaining about benefits. And no army of organizers has descended upon the city.

So why are some in Houston keeping a close eye on the California Nurses Association's low-key organizing drive here?

Two reasons: The 70,000-member union is powerful and, according to those who've followed its progress elsewhere, it often gets what it wants.

And what it wants now is the eventual membership of as many of the 20,600 mostly unrepresented, hospital-employed registered nurses in Harris, Galveston and Brazoria counties it can get.

"I don't think they know how strong they are," said Julius Getman, a University of Texas School of Law professor who has been meeting with nurses and organizers in Texas to map out strategy.

Pushing for Texas

Since entering Texas, the California group has lobbied Texas legislators for laws to lower nurse-to-patient staffing ratios in hospitals and greater whistle-blower protections for nurses, though they were unsuccessful.

And, as it has in several cities across the nation, it sponsored screenings of Michael Moore's documentary *Sicko*, using the event to spread the word before and after the film about its efforts.

"We don't chase after the nurses," said Ed Bruno, national organizing coordinator for the National Nurses Organizing Committee, a national labor union founded by the California Nurses Association. "We send out mailings and say this is what we're for."

The 104-year-old association initially focused on Austin and San Antonio. But the biggest response came from Houston nurses.

"That wouldn't have been my bet," said Bruno, who has spent more than 30 years as a labor organizer. "I would have thought Austin or San Antonio or the Valley."

The association would not say how many nurses have joined so far.

Joanne Guimond-Thompson, a registered nurse in Houston who received one of the mailings from the association last fall, said its effort to lower staffing ratios is what helped her decide to join.

Fought Schwarzenegger

Guimond-Thompson, who did not want to identify the hospital she works for, was also struck by the organization's success lobbying the California Legislature for minimum staffing ratios and the way it butted heads with California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger over his efforts to repeal portions of the law.

"If they could do it there and have success, why not in Houston hospitals?" said Guimond-Thompson, who has become a local leader in the organizing effort.

Guimond-Thompson describes herself as "very conservative." But she said she is ready to give collective bargaining a try.

"If a CEO has a contract and the director of nursing has a contract where all their rights and responsibilities are spelled out, why can't I and other nurses have a contract?" she said.

Is there a need?

Bruno estimates 1 million staff nurses work in acute-care hospitals, with 89,000 of them in Texas. However, only about 15 percent nationally belong to a union, he said.

In Harris County, union membership among nurses is limited to 127 registered and licensed vocational nurses who work for the Harris County Hospital District.

One nursing group, however, doesn't believe any union representation is necessary.

Nurses prefer to represent themselves rather than using a third party, said Clair Jordan, executive director of the Austin-based Texas Nurses Association, which focuses its efforts on lobbying the Legislature and regulatory agencies.

"We'd like for them to stay in California," said Jordan, whose association has 5,000 members in the state.

Hospitals concerned

Area hospitals have heard whispers about union organizing plans for years, said Kevin Troutman, an employment lawyer with Fisher & Phillips in Houston.

But with the increased visibility of the California Nurses Association, hospitals are more concerned now than they've been in several years, said Troutman, who was recently hired to train hospital officials on how to keep unions from taking hold.

One reason they're are concerned, he said, is they know health-care workers tend to vote yes to union representation. For example, in 2005, health-care unions won 69 percent of their elections compared to 60 percent for unions overall.

The Methodist Hospital System has a policy that respects an employees' right to chose a third-party representative, said Lauren Rykert, senior vice president of human resources. But, she added, the hospital doesn't necessarily think a third party is the best way to keep the lines of communication open.

SEIU's role

The push by the California Nurses Association may be something of a surprise to veteran union watchers who expected the Service Employees International Union to take the lead.

Known for its organizing efforts in health care, SEIU boasts that 900,000 of its 1.9 million members are nurses, lab technicians and nursing home workers.

SEIU officials said after last year's successful effort at organizing the city's 5,300 janitors that health-care workers would be their next big push.

But so far they are not actively organizing health-care workers in the city.

Texas nurses can get involved in the SEIU Nurse Alliance or join the union's Value Care, Value Nurses campaign, said SEIU spokesman Chris Coil.

"When it comes to Texas nurses, that's the scope of SEIU's work right now," he said.

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