

Dozens rally outside West Covina hospital as strike threat looms

By Maria Ines Zamudio Staff Writer

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Dozens of nurses protested and chanted "corporate greed has got to go" outside a West Covina hospital Wednesday in hopes the hospital would meet a list of demands before a strike planned for next week.

About 200 nurses marched outside the not-for-profit Citrus Valley Medical Center - Queen of the Valley Campus at noon demanding a lower nurse-to-patient staffing ratio, 24-hour "lifting" teams available to help move patients and a matching contribution to nurses' retirement plans, said Karleen George, labor representative with the California Nurses Association, which organized the rally and represents 700 nurses in Covina and West Covina.

About 25,000 nurses in Minnesota and California are threatening to strike June 10 unless their contract demands are met.

It would be the largest nursing strike in U.S. history.

Citrus Valley officials want to wait until next year before the hospital starts restoring the hospital's match to employee's retirement plans - a concession all other hospital workers have agreed to, said Lisa Faust, the hospital's senior vice president of human resources.

By 2013 the hospital will completely restore contributions, she said.

Faust also said the hospital complied with nurse-to-patient ratios outlined by state law and that the hospital staffs "lifting teams" from 8:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily. The rest of the time, nurses can use the patient handling equipment recently purchased by the hospital, she said.

Despite meeting regularly since September, the union and the hospital have not been able to reach a contract agreement.

The hospital issued a May revision contract but the union did not accept it.

As a result, the union is planning a one-day strike next Thursday, George said.

"Our contract has been extended day by day and finally the hospital came back with their last offer in May. It's not acceptable," she said. "We don't want anything that's going to be harmful for the patients."

George doesn't buy the hospital's explanations.

"For the last three years, the hospital has made \$20 million in revenue. I think it comes down to a question of priorities. We are only asking for basic nursing staffing."

Esther Brillman, a neonatal intensive-care unit nurse for 10 years, said she worries about not having enough time to tend for each baby.

"Each nurse has three babies and when one goes to lunch or break the other two nurses have to take care of the babies," Brillman said. "Sometimes, you're holding feeding one baby and the other babies start crying it's hard to attend to them."

Faust said the hospital has adequate staffing.

"There's a great deal of team work in the hospital so that we can be compliant with the law."

- The Associated Press contributed to this story

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