

## More than 300 NCH nurses sign union pledge cards

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Union is in the cards for nurses in the NCH Healthcare System.

That's the preliminary finding of a union pledge card drive and two meetings attended by more than 300 NCH nurses on Thursday at the Bellasera Hotel in Naples.

And by next week the 67 members of the NCH Nurse Organizing Committee hope to have collected more than enough pledge cards from the hospital system's 900-member nursing staff to begin the process of forming a nurses union in Naples — the first of its kind in Southwest Florida.

"The signing of the union card is a commitment, so that we can be equals in the bargaining table," said nurse Joanne Drogue on Friday. "We want to have a real input in decision making, before a decision is made."

The nursing staff at NCH began talking of organizing in recent months after mounting discontent over job cutbacks that led to higher patient ratios and disagreements over how work hours are accrued.

But it wasn't until the NCH board of trustees awarded 19 percent bonuses to Dr. Allen S. Weiss, the hospital's president and CEO, and seven senior managers in late May that morale hit rock bottom.

"Things have been increasingly difficult over the past six months," said open heart recovery nurse Elizabeth Johnston on Friday. "People are frustrated. We feel like management doesn't listen to us."

According to Weiss, news of the one-time bonus was quickly distorted and turned into claims that they (Weiss and the seven managers) had voted to give themselves the bonus and that it was an across-the-board raise.

Weiss said those allegations are false.

"It came through a flier," Weiss said Friday of where the miscommunications began.

He added that he wrote a guest editorial in the Naples Daily News, to try to give his side of the story, but that it was too late.

"It has taken a life of its own," he said.

The ensuing fallout led a group of nurses to contact SEIU Florida Healthcare Union, a part of the Service Employees International Union a national organization with 1.9 million members, of which 13,000 health-care workers are in Florida. SEIU's Hospital Systems union boasts 900,000 members in the health-care field including registered nurses, licensed practicing nurses, lab technicians, nursing home workers and home-care workers.

"We haven't had the union TV show, this has been by word of mouth," said Johnston. "We went to them (SEIU), because they are the largest health-care union in the country. They have the resources to help get our word out."

The resulting NCH nurses union would be affiliated with SEIU Florida Healthcare Union.

While the nurses sought out SEIU, NCH hired a firm to help them deal with the possibility of a union.

"Many times when we have an area that would be best served by having people that are experts, we get help," said Weiss, adding that it was not unusual.

Weiss confirmed that literature and an informational video were part of the firm's effort to reach the nursing staff.

"We want our folks to be educated as possible and understand all the changes we have been making," said Weiss. "That we have been listening and that more importantly we have been implementing."

Hours before Thursday's gatherings Weiss released a letter laying out the board of trustees' plans on how to rectify the divide between the NCH administration and the nursing staff. The board met Wednesday to discuss the issues.

Some of the moves included an 8 percent to 10 percent raise for the nursing staff (6 percent to 8 percent for all other employees), appointing an NCH nurse to the board of trustees, creating a fund for employee year-end bonuses and establishing a chief medical officer position to improve interactions between physicians, nurses and other caregivers.

"All of these positive actions by the Board of Trustees reflect a clear intent and effort on the part of the hospital leadership to listen to your concerns and respond to your recommendations," Weiss said in the letter. "Our desire to do the right thing for all of

you may not always be apparent. And I personally apologize for any unintended consequences."

On Friday afternoon, Weiss reiterated that he believes a union is not the answer to the NCH family's problems.

"We think having outsiders with idle promises (come in) will not help the patients we serve, the community we serve, our colleagues or anyone else," Weiss said. "It just drives a wedge between us."

The organization committee's next step is to file a petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

According to the NLRB, the petition must be accompanied by evidence demonstrating that the petition has the support of at least 30 percent of the nursing staff, or a total of 270 nurses.

If the petition is deemed valid, the NLRB would then help the nurses hold an election.

"The goal is to have an election within 42 days of the filing of the petition," said an NLRB spokeswoman in the Tampa office who did not want to give her name Friday.

With 300 cards signed the group has already surpassed the 30 percent requirement imposed by the NLRB.

But before anything is submitted, Johnston said the group will aim to get more than half of the nurses on-board.

"Once we have an overwhelming majority we'll file with the NLRB for an election," she said.

Now all that remains is a wait-and-see game, with lots of spectators on the sidelines anticipating the results.

"This is really exciting," said a smiling Johnston while sitting in the lobby of the Residence Inn in Naples. "My daughter works at Lee Memorial and they're all watching. And my husband, who is sitting over there, works at Physicians Regional and they're all watching, because what we're doing is going to make it better for everybody. For the nurses, the patients and the hospital."