



## Daily Labor Report

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### **New SEIU Health Care Union Will Have \$120 Million Budget, 4,000 Organizers**

The Service Employees International Union's recently launched 1-million-member health care union will have an annual budget of about \$120 million and 4,000 organizers at its disposal to sign up the 10 million unorganized nonsupervisory health care workers in this country, its head said June 26.

In an interview with BNA, Dennis Rivera, who is the chair of the new "union within a union," said SEIU is combining the members and resources of the union's 38 locals that currently represent health care workers into the new entity, which will be called SEIU Healthcare. Some 2,500 delegates attended the union's founding convention in Baltimore June 22-24, he said. The union's 38 locals currently represent workers from across the spectrum of health care, including nurses, physicians, technicians, home health care workers, and maintenance workers.

Rivera, who for the last 18 years has been president of the 300,000-member New York City-based 1199SEIU, United Healthcare Workers East, said that each of the health care locals previously had its own name and own identity. As a result, SEIU was not seen as the union for health care workers in the United States. Now, each local will have the same name, banners, and identifying logos, so that they will be unified and give SEIU a national presence, he said.

In January, when SEIU announced plans to create SEIU Healthcare, officials said that health care employees need to unite in one union in order to win comprehensive health care reform in the United States (19 DLR A-9, 1/30/07) .

At that time, SEIU President Andrew Stern said that in his capacity as president of SEIU/1199 in New York City, Rivera had worked with "elected leaders of both parties to bring health care to millions and improve quality care in hospitals and nursing homes. " He added that as SEIU

"redoubles its efforts to fix our broken health care system, Dennis' decision to shift his focus to the national effort couldn't come at a better time."

## **Structure of Union**

The national union will be governed by a council, made up of presidents of each of the 38 health care locals, which will meet every other month, Rivera said. The council will adopt strategies for organizing, politics, and legislation for the entire union, he said.

A steering committee, which will meet monthly, will be made up of the SEIU vice presidents who head the largest health care locals in the union, Rivera said. This committee will look at all the work being done in collective bargaining, organizing, politics, and legislation, he said, and discuss implementation on a local level.

The "bulk of the work" of the new union will be in organizing, Rivera said, adding he expects to add 80,000 to 100,000 new members to the union's rolls in the next year. But, he said, the union needs to grow faster. "If we grow, we have more influence," and are able to improve the lives of members and patients, he said.

When asked about current organizing plans, Rivera said there are "several initiatives" that include drives among national hospital and nursing home chains, Catholic institutions, investor-owned hospitals and nursing homes, and teaching hospitals. In addition, he said, the union is organizing some 35,000 home care workers in various states including Ohio, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

With the combined resources and organizers, Rivera said the union now will be able to move hundreds of organizers from around the country to help in particular organizing drives.

At the founding meeting, delegates made a commitment to raise \$40 million per election cycle for a political action committee fund, Rivera said, adding this would be one of the largest PACs in the United States. "This would give us a lot of influence to a national health care program," he added.

Enacting universal health care is a major goal of the new union, Rivera said, adding that the union will not endorse any presidential candidate who does not have a plan or a schedule for implementation of such a plan.

While the union is not endorsing a specific health care plan, it has adopted a series of principles, Rivera said, and is attempting to "create a movement" for universal care. The union says it seeks a health care plan that provides affordable care for everyone in the United

States, puts patients and quality care first, and recognizes that all health care workers must be treated with respect and dignity, with high standards for pay and benefits, as well as training and staffing. The union also says that workers must be full partners with management in determining the best way to deliver care and that the health care system must ensure quality long-term care to meet the needs of the aging population.

As part of another legislative priority, SEIU Healthcare and the United American Nurses jointly are launching a national campaign for safe staffing and mandatory ratios, Rivera said. The goal of the joint initiative will be to get Congress to pass legislation to require hospitals to assign, on each shift, a registered nurse to no more than a certain number of patients, depending on the particular unit.

Addressing the delegates June 23, UAN President Cheryl Johnson said that the campaign will mobilize every nurse in the two unions over the next year to "make safe staffing a reality, not a goal." She said the nurses will attempt to get legislation introduced in the Senate that establishes minimum staffing guidelines and will work to get cosponsors for a bill that already has been introduced in the House by Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.). In addition, the nurses will be working on staffing initiatives in the states, she said.

"We aim to raise the profile of this issue by engaging our communities and leaders and allies in local 'staff-ins' and other events," she said. And, when the public debate about how to reform health care heats up, we aim to make it clear that the first stop in that conversation is to talk to health care workers like us."

Later this year, SEIU Healthcare plans to launch a contest called the "Best Thing Since Aspirin" to allow health care workers to submit their ideas on how to improve the health care system in the United States. The contest will be based on a similar one called the "Best Thing Since Sliced Bread" that SEIU conducted in 2005-2006. The winner of that contest received a check for \$100,000, while two runners up each received checks for \$50,000 (22 DLR A-12, 2/2/06) . Rivera said the details are still being worked out.

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