

Sharp nurses say they're happy with labor contract

By **Keith Darce**
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

2:44 p.m. July 19, 2007

Sharp HealthCare nurses who were voting on a new labor contract Thursday said the agreement contains much of what their union had demanded during three months of negotiations, including a system to ensure that Sharp abides by nurse-to-patient ratios required by state law.

"We're happy," said Maria Guerrero, a nurse at Sharp Mary Birch Hospital for Women, as she left the Four Points by Sheraton San Diego hotel, where voting was taking place. "I think we did better than we thought we would."

However, the United Nurses Association of California/Union of Health Care Professionals failed to gain agreement by Sharp to make its seven hospitals and one skilled nursing center "closed shops," which would have required all of the nonprofit company's 3,400 nurses to join the union and pay annual dues.

About 1,700 of the nurses currently belong to the union, according to union officials.

Union members will continue to cast ballots on ratifying the three-year contract throughout the day. Results of the voting will be announced late Thursday, union officials said.

Union negotiators had made nursing ratios a top priority in their talks with hospital managers. While the previous contract contained language requiring the hospitals to follow state regulations, union officials said Sharp at times fell short of meeting that mandate. Some nurses said that managers were unresponsive when they complained that inadequate staffing compromised the quality of care they could give to patients.

The new contract would establish a committee to hear quality complaints from nurses and evaluate whether Sharp is living up to state nurse ratio requirements, said Juanita Smith, a Sharp Memorial surgical nurse who voted to ratify the labor agreement.

Nurses also said they were able to keep in place a pay structure that prevents newly minted nurses from earning higher wages than more veteran workers.

A shortage of nurses in recent years has pushed wages higher and created the opportunity at some hospitals for younger nurses to be hired into hard-to-fill positions at pay rates that exceed those earned by more experienced nurses.