



## Valley Regional RNs vote to unionize

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By [STEVE CLARK, The Brownsville Herald](#)

Valley Regional Medical Center in Brownsville was the latest domino to fall in a drive by the National Nurses Organizing Committee-Texas to unionize registered nurses at Hospital Corporation of America-owned facilities in a handful of Texas cities.

By a vote of 105 to 84, on June 2-3 nurses at Valley Regional voted to sign on with NNOC-Texas, an affiliate of the 155,000-member National Nurses United. The Brownsville vote was the culmination of a two-week winning streak for the union, during which a majority of RNs at HCA hospitals in Corpus Christi, El Paso and McAllen voted to unionize.

Nashville-based HCA, with 183 hospitals and 105 freestanding surgery centers in 20 states and England, is the nation's largest hospital system. The unionized nurses will now be represented by NNOC-Texas in collective bargaining with hospital management over patient-to-nurse ratios and other issues related to working conditions and patient care.

Union officials say their recent victories in predominantly non-union Texas have the potential to shake up the [state's](#) labor politics. Only one private hospital, Cypress Fairbanks in Houston, had previously been unionized. Cypress Fairbanks is also a NNOC-Texas/NNU hospital. NNU leaders characterized the Texas votes as a milestone toward expanding union representation and organization in the South, where union gains historically have been sparse.

Ramiro Castillo, an ICU nurse at Valley Regional, says he became active in helping NNOC-Texas/NNU achieve its goal at the hospital after researching the union organizations. He believes membership will give the hospital's nurses a strong voice in dealings with administrators, as well as the freedom to submit grievances without fear of retaliation.

"When you believe in something you stand up for it regardless," Castillo says.

A major priority for Valley Regional's newly unionized nurses — once elections are held and a negotiating team assembled — will be to push for lower patient-to-nurse ratios in the hospital's various departments, and to ensure sufficient staffing around the clock, Castillo says. Lower staffing ratios mean nurses have fewer patients to juggle, he says, which in turn means better patient care.

"We feel we want to do everything possible for patients," Castillo says. "We want better care."

Hospital management typically takes the view that unions — especially their focus on lower patient-to-nurse ratios — are harmful financially because hospitals are forced to hire more nurses to satisfy the ratio. Castillo thinks HCA, with assets of more than \$24 billion in 2008, will be OK. He does expect Valley Regional to hire more nurses to meet lower patient-to-nurse ratios, but says nurses will be eager to work at the hospital now that it's gone union.

A spokesman for HCA had not responded to a request for comment about the unionization of its hospitals as of press time.

NNOC began as a state organization in California before going national. In that state, the nurses union forced the state to adopt minimum staffing ratios — which Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger tried and failed to roll back in 2004. NNOC-Texas/NNU is pushing for the same mandatory minimums in Texas in the guise of the Texas Patient Protection Act.

"HCA nurses have been a very active part of that movement," says NNOC Director Lisa Morowitz. "In Texas, we have a pretty active presence there."