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Nurse Retention and Morale Devastatingly Low at ACMH Hospital

Kittanning, PA – The 220 nurses at ACMH Hospital have been on the front lines of the worst pandemic of our lifetimes for two full years – and on the picket line for four of their five scheduled strike days. At the forefront of their issues is management’s unwillingness to invest in effective nurse retention efforts in the middle of a crippling, statewide staffing crisis, and the corrosive effect that stance has had on staffing, retention, and quality of care.

“The morale in the OR is the lowest I’ve ever seen in my 22 years here,” says Jackie Baum, R.N., a longtime OR nurse and a member of the Kissanning community, fighting back tears as she talks. “I love my job serving my community. I had my children at ACMH Hospital. I don’t want to work elsewhere. But staying is breaking my heart.”

Baum describes a situation inside the hospital that is unsustainable: She says they don’t have enough people (nurses and OR techs alike) to staff the hospital’s six ORs. As a result, nurses are called on to do much more with less – fewer resources and less staff. They often receive no breaks to go to the bathroom or to eat outside the unit. They are exhausted and feel that hospital administration treats them as though they’re expendable. “Where’s the support?” asks Baum. “Where’s the thanks? Where’s the conversation? They don’t even give us that.”

In fact, despite the nurses’ willingness to sit down, the Hospital administration has not reciprocated and taken them up on the offer.

It is no coincidence that in the last year, more than 40 nurses have left ACMH and many more have resigned their full-time status. The nurses are burned out from understaffing. They feel underappreciated and undervalued. They’re fleeing the bedside because they don’t want to risk their patients’ safety or their licenses by working in unsafe conditions.

“Right now, the ICU is 90 percent traveling nurses,” says Anna Flick, R.N., a former ACMH ICU nurse who is now in the Cardiac Cath Lab. “The ICU nurses who are still there are having a tough time doing their assignments because if you’re the one nurse who knows where the equipment is, who knows the charting system, who knows how the hospital runs, all of those travel nurses are coming to you constantly with questions – how do I do this? What are your titrations for this medication? In many cases, these are wonderful nurses, but they’re not *our* nurses. They can’t function by themselves. They don’t know enough, and that in and of itself increases the risk for errors and the likelihood that a nurse will leave to work elsewhere.”

“When a nurse leaves, you’re not just losing a body. You’re losing continuity of care, education, experience, familiarity with the hospital, and connection with the care team,” says ICU nurse Kayley Baker, R.N. “I hear my name 800 times a shift because the majority of the ICU unit is staffed by agency

nurses who don't know where anything is or how the hospital works. You know who suffers all those losses? The patient. And our community."

Chronic understaffing is a problem that feeds on itself. When hospitals aren't staffed safely and nurses struggle daily with heavy, unsafe assignments, they leave, and the understaffing – along with the care a hospital offers – becomes worse. "Nurse retention isn't some inside-baseball term," says ACMH Nurses United Vice-President Jerry Dunn, R.N. "It's something every community member should care about, because it affects quality of care."

Legislators in Harrisburg have recognized the severity of the current staffing crisis in the commonwealth, appropriating more than \$333,000 to ACMH earmarked specifically for staff retention and recruitment. Yet management has refused to commit to using a portion of these funds, which will be available next month, for their current nursing staff.

"I repeat," says Baum, "where is the support?"

It hasn't come from the hospital, but it has come in a wealth of ways from the community – who have donated food, written letters, and spoke at rallies on behalf of the nurses [names provided upon request] – and from elected officials.

Yesterday, state Representative Abby Major, who represents the hospital and its surroundings, attended the noon rally and pledged her support to the nurses: "I am behind you!" she said. [See attached photo.]

Today, on the final day of the strike, Pennsylvania Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman will speak at the noon rally.

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