

Organizing for change

by Ann Kettering Sincox

Recently, a friend asked me if I really thought it was true that hospitals don't care about their patients. I thought for a moment, and replied, "Yes, I do. I've talked to too many nurses." I explained that while I do think hospitals are committed to providing quality health care and several are doing so in a thoughtful, considerate manner, some of the actions I've seen recently make me think that the "talk" is much bigger than the "walk." For instance:

- A hospital in the Upper Peninsula refuses to negotiate a contract with their nurses for two years, inciting the RNs to the point that 100% of them were willing to quit their jobs rather than continue to work with short staffing occurring regularly.
- The Michigan Hospital Association continues to actively oppose the passage of HB 4339, a bill which would require minimum nurse-to-patient staffing ratios and eliminate the use of mandatory overtime. In other words, the hospitals do not want the state to determine the minimum number of nurses they must have to safely staff a unit, nor do they want to give up the option of mandating tired nurses to work overtime to fill up staffing gaps. The MHA insists that the problems are under control even though nurse after nurse after nurse has shared compelling stories and data with the House Labor Committee about the dangerous situations that exist in Michigan hospitals due to short staffing and fatigue!
- Detroit Medical Center in Southeast Michigan responds to the efforts of their nurses to have a say in their practice through organizing by initiating an anti-union misinformation campaign using public funds.

Speaking Out

So, at what point do nurses say "enough is enough?" For the nurses at the Detroit Medical Center, interest in taking action to improve working conditions has been increasing steadily. The nurses started attending MNA Crisis in Nursing workshops and asking questions. Many responded to



Several members of the DMC Organizing Committee met with other labor leaders during the Labor Day Mobilization Luncheon on August 22, 2007 in Detroit.

the MNA TV and radio advertisements, which promoted the need for safe patient care through legislation. A growing number of nurses began discussing the idea of organizing for change and by January 2007, a full organizing team was in place. Phone calls and house visits began, with cards requesting MNA representation for collective bargaining being collected along the way.

Other union leaders and community activists have climbed on board the organizing campaign, declaring their support and encouraging others to stand behind the nurses. Speakers Sandra Williams, President of the Detroit Metro AFL-CIO, and Rev. Edwin Rowe of the Detroit Central United Methodist Church rallied the attendees of the Labor Day Mobilization Luncheon on August 22 in support of the nurses. Williams reminded the audience that petitions requesting DMC CEO Michael Duggan to allow the nurses to make their own decision without the use of anti-union tactics were being circulated. "No one leaves the room until everyone signs the petition!" she joked.

The DMC nurses were further supported by the Labor community by being invited to march at the front of the annual Detroit Labor Day parade on September 3. This is a position of honor, granted to those who are organizing or

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Saundra Williams, Detroit Metro AFL-CIO President, speaks in support of the DMC nurses' organizing campaign at the Labor Day Mobilization Luncheon. "We need to support each other."

needed extra support in their workplace. The nurses marched with Health Care for All, a group dedicated to providing health insurance for everyone.

On a hot sunny day in early September, several DMC nurses gathered along with Detroit community leaders to meet with various administrators in the hospitals of the Detroit Medical Center. Once again, the emphasis would be



Rev. Edwin Rowe, Central United Methodist Church (Detroit) stated "There is a price to pay for the DMC nurses who stay in Detroit rather than going to the rich suburbs where they could be making more money. [We must support them because if they leave] the patients will suffer."

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Attendees of the Labor Day Mobilization Luncheon signed the petition in support of a fair election process for the DMC nurses.

on asking for a fair election process agreement where the DMC nurses could vote on union representation without anti-union tactics being implemented by management using public funds. An earlier group of DMC nurses had already visited CEO Michael Duggan’s office with the same message. The media, who had gathered with the group, talked with Jeanette Reed and Karen Amato, both members of the DMC organizing committee.

Reed, a registered nurse from Harper Hospital, stated her reason for being part of the organizing committee succinctly. “I love what I do,” she stated, “but I see us as having less and less of a voice. Our patients are coming in sicker and sicker, and we don’t have the staff to take care of them.” She tells the story of a frightened woman facing open heart surgery. “The woman was in tears,” Reed said. “So I spent time with her, reassuring her that she would be okay. I wanted her to get a good night’s sleep before the operation, and she did. But it took me away from what I had to do and put me behind. I didn’t really have time to do that,” she commented, “but I had to decide what was more important, taking care of

patients or working overtime to catch up the paperwork.” Reed worries that the stress of trying to care for too many patients while doing other ancillary duties are hurting nurses. “Those are the kind of stresses that run you out the door.”

“I worked in research and community health for several years,” states Karen Amato, a registered nurse from Harper Hospital. “When I went back to the hospital, it was like culture shock.” She ticks off areas of concern on her fingers: retirement benefits, nurse to patient ratios, the workload, the attitude of supervisors not being willing or able to help with



Representative Coleman Young (D-4) shares his support with Frankie Moore, a registered nurse from Hutzel Hospital.

concerns, not having enough staff. “The ratios especially are what drew me to being a part of the organizing campaign,” Amato said. “I’m concerned for my co-workers.” There’s a fear factor, she commented, and some nurses are more afraid to speak out. “The key is communication,” Amato said emphatically. “Getting out accurate information to everyone. That, and, realizing that organizing is worth it for your patients, and it’s worth it for you and your practice.”

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The DMC nurses were at the front of the 2007 Labor Day parade in the “honor position,” which is reserved for groups who are organizing or are facing opposition. The nurses are organizing with MNA and MNA’s national affiliate, the United American Nurses.

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The organizing efforts by the DMC nurses are a developing story but they are not alone in nurses who are taking a stand to improve their workplaces. The nurses at Schoolcraft Memorial Hospital in Manistique, MI, dug in their heels and refused to back down on the staffing ratios they were experiencing for two years until management met their demands (for more on the Schoolcraft story, go to page 4). Registered nurses at Gratiot Community Hospital in Alma recently elected MNA as their bargaining representative (see page 3).



DMC nurses pose after visiting the office of Michael Duggan, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Detroit Medical Center. The delegation appealed to Duggan to allow the nurses to determine whether to organize or not for themselves without interference of anti-union tactics.



Community leaders listen intently to a story of a nurse being intimidated by management for her role on the Organizing Committee. Left to right: Father Norman Thompson, Detroit Metropolitan Interfaith Committee on Worker issues; Elena Herrada, Detroit Workers' Center; Carlton Burrows, MI ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now); Rev. Edwin Rowe, Central United Methodist Church (Detroit); Rev. Bill Wylie-Kellerman, Detroit Metropolitan Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues; and Rev. Charles Williams, Founder/President, Mary Church Terrell Council for Community Empowerment/National Action Network, Detroit Chapter.

Change does not come easily and the status quo, even when it is miserable, can sometimes seem safer than stepping out of the comfort zone. For many nurses, however, the time has come when they can no longer be silent. If now is that time for you and your co-workers, contact MNA at 888.MI.NURSE. The first step begins when you say, "Enough is enough. My patients, my practice, my profession deserve better." ❄



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