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Nurses protest staffing and pay at Ontario hospital

Saint Alphonsus Health System says it has fixed safety problems.

Nurses working at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center — Ontario say the hospital isn't heeding their concerns about patient care, safety, staffing and pay standards they believe are driving experienced nurses to other hospitals.

The nurses are working with the Oregon Nurses Association on a new labor contract with the nonprofit hospital, which is part of the Saint Alphonsus Health System in Boise.

"The problem is, (nurses) apply, they work here for a year or two, and then they leave," said Hallie Scott, an intensive and critical care nurse.

As with many rural hospitals, there are "unique challenges attracting and retaining highly skilled nursing staff," said Elizabeth Duncan, spokeswoman for Saint Alphonsus Health System.

The 49-bed, acute care hospital had 103 nurses and eight openings in April 2010, said Becky McCay, the nurses' union representative. There were 16 new hires and 11 terminations in the registered nursing staff by April 2011, according to Saint Alphonsus. Twelve newly hired nurses have asked to join the union since then, McCay said.

Scott has worked at the hospital for 14 years. "It is a rare occasion that I am not orienting a new employee," she said. The hospital "offers competitive compensation and benefits," Duncan said in an emailed statement, later praising "the hard work of our nurses and other associates." The Ontario nurses said they have repeatedly asked the hospital to:

- Use a wage scale that rewards nurses for longevity, instead of a pay-for-performance system. Base hourly wages at the Ontario hospital are \$4.48 to \$7.64 lower than at comparable ones in the region, McCay said. "We have (nurses at) public health departments that make more," she said. "Those nurses typically don't work holidays, weekends, nights."
- Invest in full-time nurses instead of agency nurses, who travel to hospitals for short-term jobs, often 13 weeks. The hospital spent \$4.4 million on nursing staff and \$1.27 million on agency nurses between April 2010 and April 2011, McCay said.
- Correct safety and patient-care deficiencies pointed out by The Joint Commission, which inspects and accredits U.S. hospitals. The commission's 2010 report said the hospital was providing lower-than-average heart attack and pneumonia care.

During an August visit, it found problems such as failure to maintain the medical gas life-support system. Duncan said the hospital has "resolved each of the deficiencies" since the inspection.