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Nursing contract negotiations stall at Saint Al's-Ontario

ONTARIO — Negotiations between nurses and administrators at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center-Ontario and the hospital have stalled, and both sides will have to wait another week before attempting to reach an agreement on a contract.

The current labor contract between the Oregon Nurses Association and Saint Alphonsus-Ontario expired June 30 and negotiations for a new contract have been under way since May. Nurses at the hospital, however, say SAO is not listening to concerns about pay standards, which they say are driving experienced nurses to other hospitals. As well, nurses say there are problems with patient care, safety and staffing which need to be addressed by the hospital.

Because negotiations are ongoing, officials at Saint Alphonsus-Ontario said they were unable to comment on talks between ONA and the hospital. In an emailed statement, Elizabeth Duncan, with the Saint Alphonsus Health System in Boise, said the Ontario hospital will continue to offer quality health care.

“Saint Alphonsus-Ontario offers competitive compensation and benefit to help ensure it has in place the qualified staff needed to create an environment that reinforces our mission of providing superior health care to our patients and keeping care close to home,” she said.

Duncan said concerns raised by the nurses were noted during a routine Joint Commission survey in August. She said the hospital took immediate action to correct those issues.

“The Ontario administration and staff have been working diligently to correct the survey findings,” Duncan said. “A focused follow-up survey last week cleared many of the building/facilities issues.”

She said a report on compliance will be submitted to the Joint Commission by Oct. 10 and a full survey will be conducted at that time to verify the hospital's compliance.

ONA Labor Relations Representative Becky McCay said nurses at the Ontario hospital are faced with lower pay than other hospitals offer, which creates difficulty in bringing new help and longevity to SAO.

“Our team explained to management that the current sub-standard pay is a major obstacle in recruiting and retaining nurses,” McCay said in a newsletter published by ONA Sept. 12.

McCay went on to say, in the newsletter, the management at the hospital responded to the union by canceling negotiations. She said three meetings between the hospital and ONA have been cancelled — two in August and one in September — and attorneys, on Aug. 25, requested negotiations be postponed for four months.

Hospital officials said the two sides were in negotiations Wednesday, but failed to reach an agreement. Another round of negotiations is scheduled for next week, they said.

Along with requesting the hospital correct safety and patient-care deficiencies brought up by the Joint Commission, the Ontario nurses are asking SAO to invest in full-time nurses, rather than use agency nurses. Nurses who come from an agency often stay only 13 weeks. McCay said the hospital spent nearly \$1.3 million on agency nurses from April 2010 to April 2011, along with \$4.4 million on the hospital's regular nursing staff.

Also, nurses want the hospital to use a wage scale that rewards nurses for longevity instead of pay-for-performance. Currently, McCay said, nurses at SAO are paid between \$4.48 and \$7.64 per hour less than other, comparable hospitals in the region.