

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing on Workplace Issues | July 21, 2021

Testimony by Kim Hitrik, RN

My name is Kim Hitrick. I'm a nurse at West Penn Hospital. I've been an RN for 33 years. I've worked in healthcare since I was 16 and working laundry at a nursing home. I've been around patients and healthcare facilities my entire life.

I've seen all the changes in healthcare over the many years, and let me tell you: they have not been for the better. We *have* to do something.

Recently, we nurses at West Penn formed our union, and for me it was very eye-opening. I work in rehab, which is on its own floor so it can be a little isolated. We don't always talk to people in other parts of the hospital. But once we started to get together I met a lot of other nurses, and we talked, and I saw that it's not just us in rehab who are really really struggling. It's everywhere in the hospital. You hear the same recurring themes: we don't have staff. We don't have supplies. We don't feel supported. We're not caring for patients the way we want to. And that's not the way it's supposed to be.

We're so short staffed with the acuity of patients we have. There are some things that we want to do for our patients that just don't get done. It is so hard to provide that high standard of care with such limited resources, so you go home everyday feeling defeated because you know your patient deserved more. Not having enough equipment or equipment that works is extremely frustrating. Spending too much time on charting and billing and not enough time with people is very frustrating. One recent study showed that nurses now only spend 19% -- about 81 minutes of a shift -- actually tending to patients. We're running around, and there are days on end when we have patients who we're not able to get bathed or help them brush their teeth. We have newly diagnosed diabetics being discharged without enough training and education on their care.

I thought it was just us, but it goes on in every department. People in supervisory positions tell us we'll be ok, we'll figure it out. But they're not working the floor.

The stress of it all can be too much. You get burned out so easily, you get crabby, and then you bring that home to your family. And working too fast and short-handed is scary because there's always that risk you'll make a mistake or miss something. Barcode scanning makes things safer but when you don't have time to carefully review everything every time, it makes it more challenging to deliver care to your patients.

I don't know a day that goes by that nurses don't talk about quitting. For young nurses coming out of school, this is all they know, so they think this is the way it's supposed to be or maybe the only way it can be. I know that a lot of them don't stick around long -- a recent study shows that a third of all new nurse graduates have left the profession before two years are up. Think about

that. Can you name another job where people train for years to do something they want to do, and then a third of them leave because it's just too stressful?

I have never worked in a union facility before, and to be honest, I didn't know if it was for me at first. But I do know that my profession can and must be better and the union is how we can secure my future. I want to make a better future for nurses moving forward.

Nurses of my generation are very loyal to their employers. We know the community loves this hospital and we do too. But nurses are opening their eyes and saying we have to speak up. And we have to make change. Together speaking the same language, we can make a difference. And that's what it's supposed to be. We're here for the patients. If you ask any nurse why they chose this profession it's because they want to take care of people. When we fight for ourselves, we are fighting for our patients. Provide us what we need so we can give great patient care.

You probably know that we are bargaining our contract right now and it can be tough. But if we want to give great patient care and we want nurses to stay in the profession, then we can't keep on the way we have been going. I hope that we come to an understanding that this is a shared responsibility between nurses and management. We want to work together to find workable solutions and we appreciate your support.