FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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St. Vincent Hospital Nurses Vote to Authorize One-Day Strike
As Contract Talks Stall Over RN Staffing and Patient Care Concerns

WORCESTER, MA -- The registered nurses of St. Vincent Hospital voted overwhelmingly tonight to authorize their union leadership to call a one-day strike if necessary in their ongoing negotiations with hospital management. After more than 16 months of negotiations talks continue to stall over hospital management’s refusal to improve unsafe patient care conditions at the hospital, which are compromising the quality of care patients are receiving at this major medical center.

These 740 St. Vincent nurses, who are locked in a protracted dispute with Vanguard Health Care, the for-profit owner of the hospital, are working under the worst RN staffing levels in the city. In the last 16 months nurses have filed more than 1,000 official reports of unsafe conditions at the facility (an average of more than two a day). To address the crisis, the nurses are seeking contract language to guarantee safer staffing levels in the hospital.

“With this vote, our membership is sending a clear message to management that we are ready to do whatever is necessary to protect our patients and to ensure that nurses are able to provide the care our patients deserve,” said Marlena Pellegrino, RN, a nurse at the hospital and chair of the nurses local bargaining unit. “No nurses wants to strike, but we are prepared to do so if Vanguard continues to refuse to make improvements in staffing levels – improvements that are needed to prevent a continued deterioration in the quality and safety of care at this hospital.”

The vote does not mean the nurses will strike immediately. It gives the negotiating committee the authorization to call a one-day strike if and when they feel it is necessary. Once the committee issues its official notice to strike, the hospital will then have 10 days before the nurses will go out on strike.

At the last negotiating session held on April 4, talks ended without the hospital making any movement to respond to the nurses’ staffing proposal. Vanguard management’s initial response more than two months ago was a proposal that would add more nurses to a few floors, while also calling for the closure of nine beds in the intensive care unit, increase patient assignments for nurses on a floor caring for patients recovering from open-heart surgery and eliminate a team of patient support nurses who assist other nurses with complex cases. The hospital’s plan will actually make the conditions for nurses and patients more dangerous. The nurses have been waiting for a concrete reply on the issue of staffing from the hospital for more than a month, but the hospital has yet to make any improvements to their original staffing proposal. In fact, at yesterday’s session, they left the nurses’ negotiating team waiting all day, until finally sending the federal mediator into the room at the end of the session with an unspecified “statement of intent” to hire more nurses.

“It is clear that management continues to posture in these negotiations and has no real intent at this time to work with us to address our very serious concerns,” Pellegrino explained. “We hope this helps to change that as we cannot afford to allow these talks to drag on while our patients continue to suffer every day.”

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The nurses’ concerns about the staffing conditions at the hospital are supported by a significant body of research demonstrating the link between poor staffing and a variety of poor patient outcomes and an increase in preventable patient deaths in the nation’s hospitals. In fact, a study in the New England Journal of Medicine, published last month shows that when hospital floors or units are understaffed and where there is a high turnover of patients on a unit each day (as is the case on every unit at St. Vincent Hospital), the risk of patient death increases significantly.

An earlier study in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that every patient above four assigned to a registered nurse resulted in a 7 percent increase in the risk of death for all patients under that nurses care. So when a St. Vincent Hospital nurse complains about having seven patients at one time, the science demonstrates that all of those patients are at a 21% greater risk of death. Additionally these same studies demonstrate that when nurses have fewer patients, there are significantly fewer complications, patient satisfaction increases, and nurse retention improves, with no negative impact on hospitals’ financial performance.

Nurses are outraged that their patients are forced to suffer every day while Vanguard, the multi-billion dollar for profit owner of the hospital, has reaped more than $50 million in profits over the last two years at St. Vincent Hospital alone, and just recently spent more than a billion dollars to purchase hospitals in other parts of the country. “Vanguard can well afford to provide the safe care the patients in this community deserve,” Pellegrino said.

The nurses began negotiating a new contract with Vanguard management in December of 2009 and a total of 36 negotiating sessions have been held to date. The current contract expired on Dec. 31, 2009 and has been extended by mutual agreement until April 19. The parties are scheduled to meet next on April 13.

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Founded in 1903, the Massachusetts Nurses Association is the largest professional health care organization and the largest union of registered nurses in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Its 23,000 members advance the nursing profession by fostering high standards of nursing practice, promoting the economic and general welfare of nurses in the workplace, projecting a positive and realistic view of nursing, and by lobbying the Legislature and regulatory agencies on health care issues affecting nurses and the public. The MNA is also a founding member of National Nurses United, the largest national nurses union in the United States with more than 150,000 members from coast to coast.