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AFSCME Workers at New Mexico State Psychiatric Hospital Launch Petition Demanding Plan of Action to Address Grave Safety Concerns

Las Vegas Behavioral Health Institute (NMBHI) employees gathered at their union hall Wednesday for the second time in a month demanding attention to 30% vacancy levels at NMBHI and associated safety and client service concerns resulting from the regiment of crippling overtime.

NMBHI is the state's main psychiatric hospital where employees care for over 300 New Mexico citizens requiring all types of psychiatric care; including forensic division for felony offenders, adult and adolescent psychiatric care, life-long term care, and community based services.

The decision to circulate a petition and go public with concerns was made by AFSCME Local 1380 members at a September meeting after the Department of Health proved unresponsive to employee concerns. At the heart of issue is the 72 hour work week and unacceptably high vacancy rates harming staff and the delivery of client care at NMBHI.

AFSCME Union members and leaders spoke with Representative Tomás E. Salazar and Senator Pete Campos at the union hall for two and a half hours Wednesday evening. A dozen members shared their personal experiences of surviving the 72 hour work week, the impact on their own health, and how conditions are affecting delivery of psychiatric care.

"On any given day, 30 employees will be held at the end of their shift and mandated to cover another 8 hour post," said Adam Chavarria, President of Local 1380 and a Psychiatric Technician. "Direct care staff are neglecting families and lives outside work for the sixteen hour shift - 72 hour work weeks.

"That leaves 8 hours to drive home, take care of family life, eat, sleep and report back for their normal shift. Members drive hours to work, from Mora and beyond and they do it every week. These performance expectations are abuse, it should be against the law," says Chavarria.

Connie Derr, Executive Director of AFSCME Council 18, comprising 46 locals in New Mexico clarified that, "...overtime - whether mandated or voluntary - is still an obligation forced on the

employees by management refusing to appropriately staff. It is an unacceptable issue happening at NMBHI, at state corrections, and several agencies across state government.”

Senator Campos, who pledged to involve himself directly, told members he was very aware of the issue. Campos pointed to his struggles with the current administration who, for years, has been mired in their project to overhaul the state’s compensation structure so New Mexico public service jobs are respectable careers paying more competitive wages.

“I encourage you to be more outspoken, we have funding for the facility maintenance and improvement, now we will focus on the human element,” said Senator Campos at the meeting. “This is a serious issue. We want you to be able to provide the services you were trained to deliver. Working conditions must improve.”

“The clients shouldn’t be worrying about our health,” said Tommie Jaramillo, union member and NMBHI psychiatric technician of 16 years. “They should be focused on their own mental well-being. The clients are like family to us, they know us, and can feel it when there is tension or we’re exhausted.”

The situation has devolved over four years. By their failure to address the vacancy issue, union members at NMBHI say that the Department of Health is reducing the quality of services that patients and their families deserve and expect. Some employees report fatigue so severe, that they’re involuntarily falling asleep in unguarded moments.

“I crashed my car on the way home after working my third double of the week.” said Stacey Romero, Union activist and Vocational Rehabilitation Technician. “I knew I was tired and unsafe to drive. When I got home after the accident, I followed policy and called work to request leave ahead of my next shift that night. I was threatened with termination if I didn’t come back to work. I was shaken, upset, and bruised up pretty badly, but found a ride and went into work anyway. I ended up being mandated again that night and ended up working another full 16 hour double.

“My health has suffered under the 72 hour work week. I have always donated blood - all my life since I was old enough. Recently, I was told that fatigue and stress had caused me to have an iron deficiency, and I couldn’t donate. I’m glad we’re banding together and working on this issue as a union. The relationships between us and the clients is suffering,” said Romero.

Representative Tomás E. Salazar, who also pledged to stand up and be more vocal on the issues at NMBHI, said to union members, “These issues you’re bringing out, it is a travesty I’m hearing. It is my job to do everything I can, and the legislators need to keep hearing your stories. Be vocal, so we may act at the Roundhouse using the facts.”

Chavarria cautioned and encouraged union members to hang in there and keep working the mandatory overtime. The department’s reaction to severe fatigue has made the situation worse. If you refuse to report to work, even if you’re going to collapse from lack of sleep, management issues disciplinary actions,” said Chavarria. “We’re in survival mode and the department’s handling of the crisis causes good career people throw in the towel. Turnover among new recruits is unacceptably high.”

Over the past 6 months, NMBHI has hired and lost around 40 employees. Three employees resigned hours before Wednesday's meeting. The issue driving people to resign the overwhelming amount of required overtime according to Chavarria. It costs the state tens of thousands of dollars to recruit, train and then lose a new employee.

AFSCME leaders say they know it is an uphill battle to raise the recruiting pay so more young people consider and begin careers at NMBHI. “When working with these patients who struggle with mental illnesses, we have to maintain a heightened level of consciousness to handle their personalities,” says Adam Chavarria, Psych Tech, President of Local 1380. “We deserve a plan from the Department of Health on how we’re going to continue the mission at NMBHI.”

“My great grandfather, grandmother, and father worked at this state hospital. I’ve been here 18 years and you won’t find a more dedicated and proud worker,” said Donna Montano, union member and psychiatric technician at long term care. I’m not demanding improvements for myself, I’m demanding for our dear clients, our mentally ill and aging people, they deserve the very best.”