

PASNAP targets mandatory OVERTIME

by Charles Boehm

Pennsylvania nurses are continuing their grassroots campaign to push through legislation that would eliminate mandatory overtime, battling the hospital industry's obstructionist tactics all the way.

The Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals last year helped create and promote bills in both the state House and Senate that seek to prevent health care facilities from forcing RNs and other staff to work additional shifts due to staffing shortages. But the Republican leadership, fueled by the industry lobby, has repeatedly stalled their efforts, detaining the bills at the committee level and preventing a floor vote.

PASNAP believes it has an opportunity, however, to commandeer a watered-down mandatory overtime bill introduced by State Rep. George Hasay, a Republican from northeastern Pennsylvania, at the behest of the hospital lobby. Hasay's bill would prohibit mandatory overtime only after a nurse already has worked 12 hours in a day or 60 hours in a week, far from PASNAP's standard of eight hours in a day or 40 hours in a week.

"We believe that Hasay is working somewhat in cahoots with the hospital industry to try to forestall our bill from getting enacted into law," says Bill Cruice, PASNAP's executive director. "He knows that there are a lot of people concerned about patient safety, and they want to try to make it appear as if they're doing something when in fact they're not really solving the problem."

But PASNAP and its allies have cultivated a strong base of support for a

ban on mandatory overtime – almost 100 assembly members signed on as co-sponsors for the "Health Care Worker and Patient Protection Act," PASNAP's original legislation. So the nurses are rallying their allies in Harrisburg to amend Hasay's bill to include the PASNAP provisions that provide real relief for overworked nurses.

"We expect this inadequate mandatory overtime bill to come to a vote on the floor of the assembly (this summer)," said PASNAP President Teri Evans, RN. "We are presently mobilizing all of our members, and really all nurses in Pennsylvania, to support amendments to this bill that would essentially replicate the bill that we support."

PASNAP officials are optimistic about the amendments' prospects, which already have bipartisan support. But party politics may still play a crucial role in deciding whether their efforts succeed.

"It remains to be seen how aggressively the Republican leadership in the assembly enforces discipline on Republican members not to vote for our amendments," says Cruice. "That is an open question."

The main opposition to real mandatory overtime reform comes from the powerful Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania (HAP). Hundreds of RNs rallied at HAP's Harrisburg offices last fall in support of PASNAP's legislative initiatives.

RNs also have rallied on the steps of the state Capitol with leading politicians, in addition to making legislative visits and developing postcard campaigns to inform the public. Among PASNAP's



The "ban wagon" is a promotional vehicle PASNAP RNs use to create public awareness about the need to ban mandatory overtime and support legislation to do that.

most inspired ideas was a statewide tour of the "ban wagon," a van outfitted with information about the importance of mandatory overtime relief.

"Mandatory overtime is a practice that is driving people out of health care professions," says PASNAP member Joe Adams, RN. "It's common throughout Pennsylvania, particularly at those facilities where the employees do not have a union. We have to speak for those health care workers, their patients and their families."

Recent studies have shown how mandatory overtime undermines patient care. Last year, Ann Rogers of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Nursing released a national study that linked the length of nurses' shifts with the frequency of their errors. Rogers found that 28.7 percent worked mandatory overtime at least once during the survey period, and that incidents of error tripled when shifts lasted longer than 12.5 hours.