

From The Morning Call

Nurses: Patient overload, mandatory overtime risky

They detail dangers for legislators at Hanover Twp. meeting.

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Almost 100 nurses from across the Lehigh Valley turned out Thursday to voice their concerns to a half-dozen state legislators considering bills that would prohibit mandatory overtime for hospital nurses and dramatically decrease the number of patients assigned to individual nurses.

The crowd was more than twice the number expected by the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals, organizers said. Attending were state Reps. Robert Freeman, Steve Samuelson, Pat Browne and Craig Dally and aides for state Sens. Charles Dent and Lisa Boscola.

All of the legislators voiced support for the bills, which are either slated for formal hearings or under committee review in Harrisburg.

They also urged the nurses to share their specific concerns with other legislators.

"Research has been documenting more and more that brain functions of someone who is exhausted the same as someone under the influence of alcohol," said Bill Cruice, executive director of the statewide nurses union that sponsored the event. "When you think about a nurse on her 17th, 18th hour of her day, that has been a driving force in prompting 10 states to ban mandatory overtime."

Cruice said studies done by a University of Pennsylvania researcher have proved that for every patient more than four that a nurse cares for during a shift, the risk of death to each increases 7 percent. If a nurse is forced to care for eight patients, the death risk jumps to 31 percent, he said.

For almost 90 minutes, the nurses who attended the lobbying session at the Holiday Inn-Bethlehem detailed their frustrations with patient overloads and overtime requirements.

A registered nurse who identified herself as Sharon S. said she left a cardiac unit because she was often required to serve as the nurse in charge, supervising several other nurses, overseeing medicine distribution and caring for her own five to six patients at the same time. "My eight-hour shift would always turn into eight to 10 hours," she said, adding that after 23 years she dropped her status from part-time to on-call nurse. "Nursing is not an assembly line job where you can calculate the amount of time to do each job."

She left hospital nursing, she said, after her failure to find a nurse to stay with an elderly arrhythmia patient despite hospital rules that dictate one must accompany such patients in case the patient's condition worsens.

Registered nurse Eileen Rugh told legislators most patients "need more care than can be provided by one nurse caring for eight to 15 patients. There is just not enough time."

Cruice and the nurses said they hope the pending legislation would reduce a nursing shortage in the state by decreasing stress on active nurses and drawing inactive nurses back.