

Tue, Dec. 16, 2003

Two health care unions align goals

By Judy Silber

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Uniting two powerful health care unions with a historically contentious rivalry, the California Nurses Association and Service Employees International Union pledged Monday that they will now support, and not undermine, each other's activities.

The new cooperation agreement will give the competing organizations a more powerful presence at the state's hospitals and in Sacramento, union leaders said. The California Nurses Association represents 55,000 registered nurses, while SEIU represents about 270,000 health care workers at hospitals and other health care facilities around California.

"This is an unprecedented alliance in terms of pooling the resources and power we have to accomplish common goals," said Sal Rosselli, president of SEIU local 250.

The two unions said they will no longer compete for members and will instead support their respective organizing and bargaining efforts. That could mean one union striking in sympathy with another, increasing their bargaining strength in difficult contract negotiations.

In addition, the new relationship should help the unions better attain their legislative goals. They say they will fight against proposed health care budget cuts in Sacramento and work to ensure that implementation of nurse staffing legislation takes place Jan. 1 as planned. They'll also combat efforts to repeal a health insurance bill signed by ex-Gov. Gray Davis.

"Right now the priorities in front of us are to figure out how to fight back on national and state initiatives that weaken health care," said Rose Ann DeMoro, executive director of the California Nurses Association.

In the past, SEIU and the nurses association have worked separately, sometimes to their detriment, said Joanne Spetz, associate director of the Center for California Health Workforce Studies at UC San Francisco.

Spetz said the unions' agendas were often similar, but they let their differences get in the way. At every opportunity they exchanged public barbs. For example, they disagreed about the best way to enforce the nurse staffing law, though it's of great importance to both organizations. As a result, a bill that would have increased penalties for violating the law didn't pass, she said.

The new coalition will have an immediate impact on recruiting new members, especially at the 39 hospitals owned by Tenet Healthcare Corp. The two unions have battled fiercely for the loyalties of Tenet's registered nurses.

But with the new agreement, SEIU will drop all efforts to win over registered nurses. In turn, the nurses association will begin supporting campaigns by SEIU to organize other health care workers

Not all disagreements will go away overnight. DeMoro said the nurse union is still troubled by SEIU's six-year-old labor-management partnership with Kaiser Permanente.

"We don't support that partnership," DeMoro said. "We'll continue to debate about it."

But though there are still a few wrinkles that need to be ironed out, DeMoro said the new era of cooperation should benefit both patients as well as health care workers.

"Everyone is coming to it with good intentions," she said.

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