

Nurses push for ban on forced overtime

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By Tom Barnes, Post-Gazette Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG — If you were in the hospital, would you want a nurse who's exhausted after working two straight eight-hour shifts grabbing the wrong medication to inject into your arm?

Patricia Eakin didn't think you would. So Eakin, a nurse at Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia, joined with other medical colleagues and some state legislators yesterday in demanding passage of a bill that would ban hospitals and nursing homes from using mandatory or forced overtime for nurses, except in rare emergency situations.

Eakin said that airline pilots and air traffic controllers are prohibited from working too many hours in a row for fear they might make a deadly mistake when directing a plane for takeoff or landing. The situation with nurses in medical facilities is no different, she said, since they deal with life-and-death issues.

"Mandatory overtime is getting in the way of giving the quality of care we want to give," added Michele Uhranowsky, a nurse from Mercy Scranton Hospital. "Forced overtime forces nurses out of the profession they love. We need to protect patients from the dangers of forced overtime."

They urged legislators to support a bill by Sen. Christine Tartaglione, D-Philadelphia, that would ban medical facilities from directing nurses to work a second eight-hour shift immediately after one such shift, except for natural disasters or other dire situations, like a terrorist attack, airliner crash or when the governor declares an emergency.

Tartaglione told the group that a similar bill she sponsored last year did win approval of the Senate Judiciary Committee — in part due to support from Sen. Jane Orie, R-McCandless — but never came up for a vote in the full House or Senate. Tartaglione vowed to have a better result this year.

Nurses acknowledged that some hospital administrators and nursing home officials don't want to see mandatory overtime banned, because that would make it more difficult to find sufficient personnel to fill some shifts. Sometimes forced overtime results from a failure of administrators to properly staff their facilities, nurses said.

The bill would allow nurses and nursing assistants to work overtime on a

voluntary basis, but they couldn't be forced to stay on for a second shift if they wanted to go home.

The bill is supported by health care unions like Service Employees International Union District 1199P and the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals.