

Raymond V. Mariano: St. Vincent Hospital nurses are on the side of the angels



About 20 years ago, a couple of nurses from St. Vincent Hospital came to see me in the mayor's office looking for my support with their contentious contract negotiations. Surprisingly, they didn't want to talk about wages — all they wanted to talk about was staffing levels and the ability to safely care for their patients. I was impressed that they put their patients first. From my perspective, they were on the side of the angels.

Following a 49-day strike, I was in Sen. Ted Kennedy's Washington, D.C., office, along with Congressman Jim McGovern, as the final details of the contract were hammered out between the nurses and administrators from St. Vincent Hospital and their parent company Tenet Healthcare. On that day, the angels won.

Well, once again, nurses are engaged in contentious negotiations with the hospital. Nurses who have been on the front line tackling the pandemic and who have been heralded as heroes are now walking on informational picket lines — not for themselves but for their patients.

Tenet Healthcare

Tenet Healthcare is a Dallas-based for-profit behemoth that owns 65 hospitals and approximately 550 outpatient centers and additional care sites.

While many businesses have suffered over the past year, Tenet has prospered handsomely. During that time, their stock prices rose more than 60% and, after receiving more than \$2.8 billion from the taxpayer funded CARES Act, they posted a fourth quarter profit of \$414 million which compares to a \$3 million loss during the same period the previous year.

In fact, Tenet did so well that it plans to retire nearly a half-billion dollars in debt that is not due until 2025, saving \$33 million in interest. And its own financial projections anticipate improved profitability for the coming year. Today, the corporation holds \$3 billion in cash and cash equivalents which is a dramatic increase over 2019.

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Here in Worcester, St. Vincent Hospital has been one of Tenet's most profitable hospitals. In 2019, the hospital posted a record profit of \$73 million with a profit margin of about 14% — four times the state average and five times the profit margin for UMass Memorial.

Patient safety

The nurse's main concern is patient safety. Over the past year, nurses have filed more than 500 official reports citing patient safety issues. On many of those reports, nursing supervisors wrote “aware unsafe” or “no staff available” — a clear acknowledgement of the nurse's concerns.

Nurses allege that insufficient staffing, staff furloughs, and layoffs have led to dramatic increases in patient falls, patient suffering from preventable bedsores, the onset of preventable complications, dangerous delays in patients receiving needed medications, and even preventable deaths. Those are serious charges.

One nurse wrote about her breaking point caring for five patients — four of whom needed continuous oxygen monitoring. One of the patients, who also had COVID, needed peritoneal dialysis. This patient required a wide range of monitoring and analysis with any missed assessment possibly resulting in a sudden drop in blood pressure and possible cardiac arrest.

Another patient was having multiple grand mal seizures — one after the other with each being more dramatic than the last. Another patient was in acute respiratory distress having multiple mucus plugs and high levels of secretions.

At the end of her shift, the nurse said she was “broken.”

Another charge is that management at the hospital has taken the dangerous step of co-mingling COVID and non-COVID patients.

According to the nurses, conditions have gotten so bad more than 100 of their nursing colleagues have left St. Vincent's and gone elsewhere — most to UMass Memorial which they assert has better staffing ratios, along with employee pay and benefits.

Negotiations

On Jan. 28, after more than a year of negotiations, management issued their “last, best and final offer” — but made it clear that they would not be addressing staffing issues. On February 10, 89% of St. Vincent's nurses voted to authorize a strike. A strike is now scheduled for March 8.

While management doesn't have a couple of hundred nurses to put on the sidewalk for informational picketing or the political clout to bring a US senator to stand with them, they do have the resources to run full page ads in the local newspaper.

In their ads, they assert that St. Vincent has the most comprehensive staffing language of any nurse's contract in the state. What they don't say is that — even without staffing language — other hospitals are staffing their units at a much higher level.

This is not a typical labor-management dispute which might result in an inconvenience for customers. If the nurses go on strike, especially if we have a spike in COVID cases, patient safety will be in jeopardy. Both sides need to get back to the negotiating table and stay there until the issues are resolved.

I have nothing against “for profit” health care. In my personal experience, they have brought great efficiency to an industry where waiting for hours was considered routine. And Tenet has a right to make a profit. But, they do not have the right to jeopardize patient safety. Their commitment to their stockholders has to be equally matched, at a minimum, with their commitment to the patients who are in their care — care which provides them with their profits. Right now, that does not seem to be the case.

As I see it, the St. Vincent nurses continue to be on the side of the angels.

Email Raymond V. Mariano at rmariano.telegram@gmail.com. He served four terms as mayor of Worcester and previously served on the City Council and School Committee. He grew up in Great Brook Valley and holds degrees from Worcester State College and Clark University. He was most recently executive director of the Worcester Housing Authority. His column appears weekly in the Sunday Telegram.

For more information on how you can support the St. Vincent Hospital nurses during the strike, visit: <https://forms.massnurses.org/we-stand-with-st-vincents-nurses>