

Petition to save Boston's Tufts Children's Hospital garners more than 56,000 signatures

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Outrage is mounting over the decision to close Tufts Children's Hospital, a 41-bed pediatric facility in Boston, Massachusetts. A change.org petition to "Save Tufts Children's Hospital in Boston!" has garnered more than 56,000 signatures from concerned parents, staff and community members who oppose Wellforce Health System's decision to close the children's hospital effective July 1, subject to regulatory approval. Tufts employees were informed of the closure over a Zoom call.

Tufts Children's has a 128-year history in the city, beginning in 1894 in a philanthropic effort taking impoverished children aboard the Boston Floating Hospital in Boston Harbor for nourishment and health treatment. Wellforce, which operates the children's hospital, announced January 20 that it plans to convert its pediatric inpatient beds to adult ICU and medical/surgical beds to increase capacity for treating critically ill adults at its Tufts Medical Center campus.

Children who need inpatient treatment will be referred to nearby Boston Children's Hospital (BCH), which will become the city's only dedicated pediatric inpatient facility. A 40-bed neonatal intensive care unit, a Level 3 ICU, will remain at Tufts and will continue to care for particularly ill newborns. Tufts will also continue pediatric primary care services and its Center for Children with Special Needs.

Tufts' general pediatrics residency will close to new residents beginning July 1. Existing pediatric residents will be given the option to complete their training through a combination of rotations at Boston Children's and Tufts. Wellforce said that it would work to find jobs for Tufts Children's Hospital employees among its 2,000 open positions at other company-owned facilities, which are not in the immediate area.

As of Thursday afternoon, more than 56,000 people had signed the petition to stop the closure of Tufts Children's. Tim O'Connell, founder of Tommy's Place, a vacation

home for terminally ill cancer patients and their families on Cape Cod, began the petition drive. Those signing the petition include medical professionals, families of patients at Tufts Children's and former patients of the hospital.

Common themes running through the comments of signatories are testimonials from parents on the compassionate care provided at the children's hospital and anger over the subordination of children's medical care to "non-profit" Wellforce and Tufts Medical Center.

"Tufts Floating Hospital was so important to my daughter with her seizure disorder when she was a child," writes Judith Farris. "I will be forever Grateful for the Quality Care she received from the Caring, Compassionate highly trained Medical Personnel. It is incompetent to Close this Wonderful Hospital for Children!"

Daniel Laemmehirt comments: "NOBODY of consequence gives a damn whether or not the billionaires that run Tufts make MORE money. If they allow children to DIE because 'they need more moneys to stack,' then they should IMMEDIATELY be sued and the CEO's pay be slashed by 99%. With that money, Tufts CAN stay open!"

"Tufts provides an unmatched caring and comprehensive medical home for children from all Boston neighborhoods, eastern New England suburbs and communities, for new immigrants and underserved families," writes Dr. Susan Perrine. "The rapport and mutual care with referring physicians is rare. It is a legacy of Boston medicine that should continue to train students and residents in the best traditions. There is space to add adult beds in the medical center if needed."

And from Robert Kane: "The lack of ethics and the worship of money are the motivating factors of too many greedy power mongers in business and government today. Keep the Children's Hospital open and intact."

Wellforce Health System makes no mention of the

COVID-19 pandemic in its announcement of the Tufts Children’s closure. However, the *Boston Business Journal* reports that as the pandemic enters its third year, “Hospitals are approaching their breaking point as they manage the influx of COVID-19 patients and other medical patients. As of Jan. 3, 93 percent of all medical/surgical beds and 86 percent of all ICU beds were occupied in Massachusetts, and case counts are expected to rise in the days ahead.”

In its statement announcing the closure, Wellforce writes: “[T]he Boston-area health care market is rapidly changing. The number of adult patients in need of highly specialized medical care at Tufts Medical Center has risen dramatically—so much so that the hospital is forced to turn away hundreds of patients each month.”

“At the same time,” Wellforce claims, “projections suggest fewer children will need hospitalization and those who do need inpatient treatment will have more serious health issues than ever before.” The health system says, “pediatric patients who require acute or specialty care will be sent to BCH, where they will continue to have world-class clinicians and care teams.”

No substantiation is provided to back up the “projections” claiming fewer children will need hospitalization in the future. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) reports that COVID-19 cases among children have spiked dramatically in 2022 due to the Omicron surge and that over 3.5 million child cases of the disease were reported nationwide in January.

AAP reports: “For the week ending January 27th, over 808,000 additional child COVID-19 cases were reported, down from the peak level of 1,150,000 reported the week ending January 20th. However, child cases this week remained extremely high, triple the peak level of the Delta surge in 2021.”

As of January 27, Massachusetts reported 242,945 child cases (ages 0–19) of COVID-19, or 17.1 percent of the 1,418,159 cumulative total cases for all ages. On Thursday, Massachusetts reported 10,068 new COVID-19 cases among public school students and 1,918 among staff for the week that ended February 2.

The Greater Boston area is known for its teaching hospitals and groundbreaking research and medical care. As with the other nominally nonprofit health systems in the state, however, Wellforce’s decisions are not motivated by patient care, but by the bottom line.

Tufts Medical Center is the 10th largest hospital in Massachusetts, according to *Boston Business Journal*, with total net patient service revenue of \$851,780,649 in

2019. Michael Apkton, CEO of Tufts Medical Center from fall 2018 to September 2020, received the largest percentage increase in total compensation among health care executives, hauling in \$1.7 million in 2019, a staggering 582 percent increase from the prior year.

Wellforce appointed Dr. Michael Tarnoff as president and CEO of Tufts Medical Center and Tufts Children’s Hospital in June 2021, after serving as interim president and CEO for the previous nine months. His current salary and compensation are not yet available.

Nurses at Tufts Medical Center and Children’s Hospital are members of the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA). The MNA’s web site does not indicate any action being taken to defend jobs affected by the children’s facility’s closure.

In 2019, 1,200 nurses at Tufts Medical Center carried out a one-day strike against low wages. Tufts management responded by locking out the nurses for an additional four days, receiving no strike pay from the MNA. They were eventually forced back to work with none of their demands having been achieved.

In 2021, the longest nurses strike in Massachusetts history ended at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester with nurses approving a five-year contract with Tenet Healthcare presented to the membership by the MNA. It included below-inflation wage increases, retained a tiered wage structure and fell short on nurse-to-patient staffing ratio demands.

Tufts nurses and other staff, along with patient families, must organize a rank-and-file and neighborhood committee—independent of the MNA, other unions and their political supporters in the Democratic Party—in a fight to stop the closure of Tufts Children’s Hospital. A Rally to Save Tufts for the Kids! is planned for Saturday morning, February 5, outside the hospital.



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