

# California nurse dies by suicide, and nurses respond: “We went from health care heroes to sacrificial lambs”

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*Are you a nurse? We want to hear from you: Tell us about the conditions at your hospital and what you think about this tragedy.*

The tragic death by suicide of a nurse at Kaiser Permanente’s Santa Clara Medical Center in Northern California has provoked an outpouring of sympathy, anguish and justified anger at the health care system among nurses and other health care workers throughout the country.

The death has struck a chord with nurses who have suffered from overwork for decades, enormously intensified throughout the two-and-a-half years of the pandemic. Nurses confront a health care system that exploits them relentlessly, while continuously frustrating and undermining the aim to which health care workers have dedicated themselves: saving lives and improving public health.

The *World Socialist Web Site* first published the report of the nurse’s suicide on May 2, 2022. Since then, more than a quarter-million workers have read and shared the report with their colleagues, friends and families. Many nurses and health workers have sent in statements of support, while sharing their own experiences.

Tiana wrote, “Nursing is a complete and utter tragedy. Our facility has hemorrhaged nurses since the pandemic. It’s depressing, dirty, dysfunctional and a flat-out dump, where nursing dreams go to *die!*”

“We voice our concerns to management to have our cries fall on deaf ears. We are attacked daily and blamed for everything. The number of nurses taking antidepressants just to function on a daily basis is horrifying. We went from health care heroes to sacrificial lambs who work, day in and day out, to be

unappreciated. I’m over it!”

Emphasizing the difficulty nurses face in even accessing mental health services, Kaiser nurse Emily said, “Honestly, this is not a surprise to any health care worker. My fellow nurses all said, ‘I understand.’ None of us are shocked, just deeply, deeply saddened for his coworkers and every nurse—especially emergency room nurses.

“What makes this extra awful is that we can’t be seen by mental health professionals. Our Kaiser system simply does not have enough providers and, even before the pandemic, would have so few appointments they’d have to refer us out to a system that is increasingly overburdened. You literally cannot be seen by a therapist for months unless you say you are actively thinking about harming yourself in the near future.”

Speaking on the need for the profit motive to be removed entirely from the health care system, Sally, who used to work as a registered nurse (RN) in a geriatric psych unit, wrote, “The system is so corrupt and exploited by greed. The doctor we had would change the meds to get behaviors, delusions and hallucinations out of the patients to hold longer to fill the beds. Heard it was \$2,800 a night billed to insurance and Medicaid. Soon as we would chart meds that were helping the patients, he would change the meds to get the behaviors to hold them.”

“I have been a nurse for 20 years. In the last eight years the conditions became deplorable. Health care is run like what manufacturing called the ‘lean concept,’ and it is everywhere now. The expectation is to do three people’s jobs while paying for one. This problem exists because health care is for profit and greedy CEOs and

administrators.

“I worked in a nursing home too. I quit because the new expectation was to take care of 44 patients. Patients were mixed rehab, dementia with behaviors, long term care and new admissions from the hospital. My last position was the psych unit. I was expected to do my duties as a nurse, resolve pharmacy issues and do the admissions—and it took about four hours to do one [of these].

Darlene, a nurse in Tennessee, wrote, “Nothing will improve in the lives of nurses and other health care professionals or for the lives of patients until profit is taken out of the health care system. I have worked as an RN for seven years and as a nurse practitioner for 14 years. In that time, the health care system has steadily declined.”

Emphasizing the fear of nurses after the criminal conviction of nurse RaDonda Vaught, Dana wrote, “We are so short staffed it’s impossible to do your job properly. We are doing the jobs of multiple staff members. We are CNAs, housekeeping, admissions, unit clerks, security, dietary. We are the eyes and ears of the physicians, the advocate for the patient, the guardians. And we are treated like our job is meaningless.

“We are so burnt out, and every shift we are stuck [working] later and later trying to chart for fear if we miss something or make a mistake we will be hauled off to jail. Ninety percent of nurses are going to quit by 2030, and just like everything else in this country the government turns a blind eye. There is no one left to take care of you. Don’t end up in the hospital.”

Andie wrote, “Nurses are exhausted. We are a profession that gives ourselves entirely to help others. So as unsafe as we know the patient-to-nurse ratio is, it’s hard for us to turn a blind eye to patients who need help. It’s not the patients’ fault after all.

“My hospital has eight patients to one nurse ratio currently with them attempting to push a ninth. My unit is large, and very often there are only four nurses covering the whole thing. With only four nurses for an entire unit, you can’t take the time to know your patients, educate them, let alone properly clean them by yourself.

“If a patient becomes critical you are already leaving 31 patients in the hands of one nurse. It is terrifying to think it will always be like this. You ask to have your

hours cut because you can’t handle the stress of the job, and they flat out tell you, ‘no.’ When you explain to them why, they ignore you.

“Many of our nurses have gone to the supply rooms to break down and cry. I’m honestly surprised there are not more stories like this, and it is a shame. We were considered ‘heroes,’ yet nobody recognizes that we are truly just human like everyone else.”

On Friday, former Tennessee nurse RaDonda Vaught faces sentencing for a medical error that tragically claimed the life of a patient. The prosecution and conviction of Vaught is an effort to scapegoat a nurse for the crisis of the entire health care system. The Socialist Equality Party calls for her conviction to be removed and her license reinstated.

The growing anger of nurses and other health care workers must be developed into an organized movement against a social and economic system that subordinates health to private profits.



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