

Support pours in for scapegoated North Carolina nurse Michelle Heughins

Our reporters
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Last week nurse Michelle Heughins loudly declared her innocence at her arraignment in a North Carolina courtroom. Heughins was charged with involuntary manslaughter in the December 2019 death of 56-year-old John Neville at the Forsyth County jail in Winston-Salem. Neville died after five officers knelt on him while he was handcuffed in a prone position and screamed, “I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe!” All the evidence that has been released, including hours of body cam footage, shows Nurse Heughins was the only person who attempted to save Neville’s life.

Heughins’ prosecution occurs just weeks after a Tennessee judge sentenced former Vanderbilt University Medical Center nurse RaDonda Vaught to three years probation for a medical error, which led to the death of a patient. Vaught only eluded jail time because of the outpouring of support by rank-and-file nurses around the country.

With increasing viciousness, nurses and health care workers are being scapegoated for the virtual breakdown of the health care system due to the relentless cost cutting by major hospital systems, which are pursuing lean staffing models to increase their bottom lines. In Ohio alone, the state attorney general has targeted nursing home staff, bringing charges against a staggering 106 workers.

Across the world, from France to Germany, New Zealand, and New Jersey, nurses and other health care workers are fighting for safe staffing, an end to exhausting work schedules and the subordination of health care to private profit.

The WSWS has received numerous statements of support for Heughins from nurses around the country and the world and will continue to publish them. The WSWS *Health Care Workers Newsletter* and the Steering Committee of Rank-and-File Nurses are demanding the immediate dropping of all charges for nurse Heughins and continue to demand the expungement of the criminal conviction from RaDonda Vaught’s record. Names in the comments which follow have been changed for anonymity.

Felix, a nursing supervisor in the California prison

system, told the WSWS, “When you speak up you can expect retaliation. I’ve seen some bad things done by nurses & doctors to patient/inmates & covered up by management. Not only management at the prison but also executive level people in Sacramento. The court mandated receivership has done nothing to fix the problems that still occur on a daily basis in the prison system.”

Sarah, a nurse who used to work for Wellpath (formerly Correct Care Solutions), said she was not surprised by the effort to put the blame on Heughins. “I never felt that CCS/Wellpath had the medical staff’s back. The facility I worked at had a capacity of over 1,400 inmates, and was often over 1,500. I worked night shift. We had one Medical Assistant or EMT working in intake where routinely 40 inmates were brought in each shift. We had one LPN or RN working medical housing, providing care for up to 43 inmates of which about 75% were withdrawing from drugs and/or alcohol. The rest might be new surgical, paralysis, mental health/Alzheimer’s/suicide watch, and any other diagnosis you can imagine that requires constant monitoring.

“This nurse routinely gets 8-10 admissions per night. We had one RN working in the clinic responsible for the medical care/emergencies of the whole jail. She/he routinely answered over a hundred medical requests each night, reviewing the charts of those patients and scheduling them for appropriate care the next day. In addition this nurse handles all emergencies in the facility, sees patients with asthma attacks, falls, cuts, fights, seizures, etc, provides routine and emergency care for 20-30 diabetics, routinely 10-15 insulin dependent. This nurse also reviews every intake chart to assure inmates are appropriately housed, medical care scheduled as needed, medications are verified/reviewed with the provider, and orders initiated.

“The cry from nursing was continuously ‘we need more help.’ Early in my career we were told all jails are like this. Eventually with new medical contracts came increased staffing allowed, but the pay, cost of benefits and the reputation of how medical staff are treated kept nurses from

coming to work here. Anytime there is a death, it is nursing's fault. Although, as you can see from above, nursing is not staffed to provide exceptional care. I feel bad for this nurse. I'm sure this could have happened to me early in my career as a corrections nurse.

Alabama nurse Adrianna spoke about the scapegoating of nurses and the dangerous conditions in US hospitals just weeks after the sentencing of RaDonda Vaught.

"I closely followed the RaDonda Vaught case and when I saw that she was convicted it scared me a lot. We all make mistakes. Every nurse saw themselves in her. It set a scary precedent. We know that we are the last link in the chain of command. I never thought the hospital would pay that amount of money to pay a settlement and leave the criminal charges on the nurse.

"When I heard about Michelle Heughins, I wanted to watch all the body cam footage for myself before reading other people's opinions. Then I read the full autopsy report. I am flabbergasted that she can be charged with anything. I watched the officers on him while he couldn't breathe. I heard them tell her to get out of the cell and she was watching from the window to make sure he was OK. When it seemed like he wasn't breathing, she started CPR and called out for an AED and from what I understand he achieved ROSC (return of spontaneous circulation) and was taken alive to the hospital and died a few days later.

"I cannot see at any point how they are putting this on her, yet they are. It outrages me. Same with RaDonda. I would never go to Vanderbilt as a nurse or a patient. The hospital paid its settlement and wiped its hands clean and did not stand behind her.

"In terms of staffing, you'll have days where there might be adequate staff, but that is so rare. Most of the time it's unsafe ratios. Sometimes you might technically have safe nurse ratios, but you won't have the support staff you need. Some days we may not have a secretary, so the nurses have to answer the phones, do the scheduling, etc. Or there may not be housekeeping or janitorial staff, so we have to pass out dietary trays and empty the trash."

"You can't take care of everybody by yourself. There are times I have to choose between patients and it breaks my soul in half. When I go home at night, it crushes me emotionally. I've cried many times in the shower after work."

"I'm a good nurse and I work hard. But there is no way to take care of your patients in these unsafe conditions. My whole life since I was a child I wanted to be a nurse. Then two years into it I think, 'I can't do this anymore.' I've walked in on two patients who died because the hospital wouldn't provide enough nurses or monitors or move the patients to the floor with the level of care that they needed."

Evelyn, a nurse in Chicago, said, "It is unbelievably vile that the systemic failures of the healthcare system, which were pointed out by nurses *before* the pandemic, are now being blamed on those same nurses. The disgust I feel towards the jail staff and police for letting her take the fall is off the charts. I'm so furious my hands are shaking as I write this. I have been a healthcare professional for 20 years and the degradation of respect for nursing has never been so palpable. Sickening."

Wisconsin nurse Mae said, "I think it's terrible how Nurse Michelle was not allowed to assess and care for her patient! Mr. Neville! Nurses are fed up and done with unsafe working conditions. Now there is a pattern of charging nurses as criminals! Nursing is a calling to care for people not a calling to be abused. Can't wait to see CEOs cleaning bedpans when nurses really start leaving bedside care."

Maryland nurse Tammy said, "I oppose the victimization and persecution of Michelle Heughins and the for-profit, capitalist health care systems under which such injustices are able to flourish."

Significantly, a number of comments have come in from health care workers internationally expressing their solidarity.

Miguel, a health care worker in Mexico, stated, "The officers who gave the orders were acquitted while the nurse, who was taking care of the victim, was blamed for his death? That's absurd. I stand with Michelle Heughins. Solidarity from Mexico."

Melania from Germany, where health care workers in the North Rhine-Westphalia region have struck for over five weeks, wrote that 'Health care workers have become sacrificial lambs.

"There are people, especially those in power or who able to reverse the situation in order to make it better. They lie and make someone else take the fall. It's always the medical worker's fault. Pointing the finger is the easiest way for institutions to free themselves from liability. Safe work environments are among the rarest for medical workers. It's so sad."



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