

Nurses question staffing levels after patient suicide at Palomar Health in Escondido, California

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19 July 2022

Register for the next Health Care Workers Rank-and-File Committee meeting this Sunday, July 24, at 11 a.m. PDT/2 p.m. EDT. The meeting will include a discussion of the Palomar incident as well as other issues facing health care workers, such as short staffing, workplace violence and burnout. These meetings are a place for free and democratic discussion in building the fight to unite all health care workers with the entire working class to maintain safe working conditions, oppose hospital closures and layoffs, and defend the right to high-quality health care. Register here.

At a recent July meeting of the national health care workers steering committee, a committee nurse reported that in April a patient at Palomar Health in Escondido, California had jumped from a sixth-floor balcony and died. It was agreed upon during the committee meeting that the incident be reported on and a call made for nurses with any additional information to come forward.

At a meeting in May, nurses founded a national health care workers steering committee to assist in the building of rank-and-file committees at every hospital and workplace to defend nurses and health care workers, and to connect opposition to victimization to a struggle to advance the interests of nurses and patients against the for-profit health care system.

Nurses have taken to social media to discuss the incident at Palomar, which has not received any attention in the media. Nurse April, a California nurse and influencer, made a video on TikTok detailing information she has received from nurses and calling for more information.

The patient was allegedly on 5150 hold after a previous suicide attempt and was under 24-hour one-to-one supervision. The patient was somehow able to travel to the room's balcony and throw him or herself over the

railing, ending the patient's life. The incident took place on April 24, 2022.

In her video, April cited the recent strike vote of Palomar nurses in June and connected the nurses' fight for safe staffing to the tragedy. She said:

If you recall, in June, the Palomar nurses served a strike notice and they were going to strike over unsafe staffing in the hospital. From my understanding this person did have a sitter, however the sitter ended up injured in the situation also ... from speaking to sources, sometimes sitters are required to watch two people at one time in the ER, so that doesn't sound safe to me. I am so sad and sorry for this family's loss and I sure hope that this loss didn't happen due to unsafe staffing.

A letter sent by the Palomar CEO on the day of the incident to all employees was leaked to social media and confirms the tragedy.

The first two paragraphs of the letter read, "We are sad to share that this morning, a patient jumped from a sixth-floor balcony at our Escondido campus. The patient did not survive, and we are going to keep the person's identity confidential out of respect to the person's family, and until authorities can finish their investigation.

"We can tell you that this particular patient was under 24-hour supervision, but was able to elude their caretaker and make their way over the balcony's railing, thus ending their life."

World Socialist Web Site reporters traveled to Palomar's Escondido location to speak with nurses about the incident at an evening shift-change last week.

Reporters arrived with articles detailing a similar tragedy that had taken place at Orlando Regional Medical Center (ORMC) in Florida and began asking Palomar nurses for their thoughts and comments on the Palomar patient suicide.

The reporters—who have spoken with nurses at the Escondido campus many times with no issue—were promptly approached by security and told to leave immediately. One officer stated that no such incident took place and reporters must have “received secondhand information.”

There are many unanswered questions about the tragedy. Why was a patient on a behavioral watch placed in a room with an accessible balcony? Why was the 24-hour sitter unable to keep the patient away from the balcony or call for help from additional staff? What were staffing levels at the time of the incident? Were staff forced to sign a nondisclosure form after the incident in an attempt by the hospital to cover up the tragedy?

The steering committee is calling on nurses to report information on this incident or similar incidents at your workplace. Use the form at the bottom of this article to contact us confidentially.

A recent similar incident took place in Florida at Orlando Regional Medical Center (ORMC) According to reports, a patient jumped from the 8th floor of the hospital on May 16, 2022, using a bedside table to break a window in his room. The patient was located on the Progressive Care Unit (PCU), a unit designed for patients requiring greater care and assistance. At the time of the tragedy, nurses were so overworked and understaffed that the suicide was not discovered for some time.

According to reports from ORMC nurses, the hospital worked quickly to cover up the incident. When state agents arrived to investigate, nurses reported that the window had been quickly replaced and the grass below the hospital where the patient’s body was found was burned. Additional staff were even supplied during the hours of the investigation to cover up the poor staffing levels. The additional staff was removed as soon as state officials concluded the investigation.

In protest against the exhausting workloads which led to this tragedy, 40 ORMC nurses spontaneously walked off the job at the end of May. While nurses were allegedly pushed to sign nondisclosure agreements, many spoke through prominent nurse influencers to make sure the hospital was exposed.

While more information is required to fully understand the April tragedy at Palomar, it is likely that—similar to the

suicide at ORMC—short staffing and dangerous working conditions played a role in the incident.

Three thousand Palomar nurses recently voted by 96 percent to strike but had their strike called off at the last minute by the California Nurses Association (CNA) and Caregivers and Healthcare Employees Union (CHEU). The unions announced a sellout tentative agreement and rushed a vote, leaving workers with little to no time to fully review the contract, which includes no concrete provisions for improved staffing and a paltry 10.25 percent minimum wage “raise” over the life of the contract, which comes out to approximately 3.41 percent per year, far below skyrocketing inflation rates.

The fact that Palomar nurses were ready to fight indicates that Palomar is not immune to the chronic understaffing that workers in hospitals across the country face to maintain the profit interests that dominate the entire health care system. In fact, nurses told the *World Socialist Web Site* in June that conditions are increasingly untenable and have been compounded by the pandemic. Nurses also described high turnover rates among staff and poor nurse-to-patient ratios.

Exposing the tragedy at Palomar is crucial in the fight against not only individual hospital administrations but an entire political establishment that has sacrificed public health and countless lives for private profit. A significant step forward was made in May when nurses from around the country formed the independent Nurses Rank-and-File Steering Committee. Please register here for the upcoming meeting, this Sunday July 24 at 11 a.m. PDT/2 p.m. EDT.

To contact the World Socialist Web Site Healthcare Workers Newsletter fill out the form below and someone will be in touch with you as quickly as possible.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact