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Wilkes-Barre General Nurses Ratify New Union Contract

After reaching an agreement on Friday, the nurses at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital today overwhelmingly ratified a new union contract with significant and sought-after provisions for nurse retention. It is the first full contract negotiation with for-profit owners Community Health Systems that did not include a nurses' strike since the company bought the hospital in 2008.

Wilkes-Barre, PA – In the middle of a crippling statewide staffing crisis, the 300-plus nurses at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital ratified a union contract on Monday that greatly prioritizes nurse retention and therefore patient care.

“Two full years into a pandemic that has severely stressed our healthcare system and thinned the ranks of bedside caregivers, this contract, with its emphasis on safe staffing, prioritizes excellence in patient care even as it acknowledges the tremendous contribution of frontline caregivers,” says PASNAP President Maureen May, R.N. “We are thrilled.”

The Wyoming Valley Nurses Association/PASNAP bargaining committee reached a tentative agreement on Friday evening with management. At the forefront of negotiations were nurse staffing levels – a quality of care concern, since unsafe understaffing of our hospitals harms patients, increasing errors and patient complications.

In a strong effort to keep nurses from leaving and to improve staffing levels at the hospital, the nurses' new contract includes historic wage increases – 18%, 3% and 3% over the three years of the contract. Base wages at Wilkes-Barre General had fallen behind those of neighboring hospital systems, including Veterans Affairs, Geisinger, and Lehigh Valley Health Network, and staffing has suffered.

Under the provisions of this contract, there are 58 nurses, each with more than 30 years of experience, who will be receiving a 20.74% raise in recognition of their service to the hospital and the community, and the advanced skills and knowledge they bring to patient care.

“Raises over the life of the three-year contract total over \$9.2 million paid to our nurses in and around the Wyoming Valley, not Wall Street and not executives in Tennessee, where CHS is based,” said Lori Schmidt RN, Treasurer of WVNA. “We have many phenomenal male RNs, but March 8th is also International Working Women’s Day and I couldn’t be happier for all of our nurses and our area.”

Stanley Wielgopolski RN, and PASNAP Treasurer, said, “We are proud of this agreement overall and glad that we’ve gained a working relationship with the Hospital. In addition to raises, we have a process to address our clinical concerns through our Patient Care Council to improve the quality of care for our patients, our foremost concern.”

Rates for nurses who precept new hires and nurses who are assigned as charge nurse both increased \$0.25 per hour to \$0.75.

A bonus of \$500 per nurse will be paid from \$1.19 million in funds allocated from House Bill 253 if the hospital accepts and receives the funds. HB 253 was recently passed by the Pennsylvania legislature to recruit and retain frontline caregivers.

The Wyoming Valley Nurses Association is an affiliate of the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals (PASNAP), which represents more than 9,000 nurses and healthcare professionals across the commonwealth and was founded on the belief that patients receive the best care when clinical-care staff has a strong voice to advocate for both patients and themselves.

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