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Kaiser to Boost California Therapist Numbers Under New Contract

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Kaiser Permanente will be required to hire more mental health therapists and increase crisis services under a new four-year contract ratified by the therapists' union Thursday.

The agreement, which covers about 2,000 therapists for the nonprofit HMO in Northern California and the state's Central Valley, concludes the longest strike of mental health workers in history.

The standoff began in August with the therapists protesting Kaiser's inability to provide regular and timely behavioral health care to members, with some patients waiting months for follow-up treatment after an initial assessment.

"It took much longer than it should have to reach this agreement, but, in the end, we succeeded in securing important improvements in patient care that Kaiser negotiators told us across the bargaining table that they'd never agree to," Jennifer Browning, a licensed clinical social worker and member of the National Union of Healthcare Workers' bargaining committee, said in a statement.

The agreement is retroactive to September 2021, when the existing contract expired, and will end September 2025. It provides:

- Therapists with two additional hours per week to respond to patient emails and voice messages, contact social services agencies, and perform other duties;
- A 50-cent-per-hour raise for bilingual therapists, and;
- An increase in the duration of initial mental assessments for children, from 60 minutes to 90 minutes.

Must Follow Committee

The agreement doesn't specify how many people Kaiser must hire in the coming years. But it holds management and labor responsible for adopting a plan to better treat specific diagnoses and requires Kaiser to implement the recommendations from those committees. Several of those panels have a mandate to increase staffing, union spokesman Matt Artz said.

[California Therapists, Kaiser Agree to End Strike Over Staffing](#)

That requirement could be Kaiser's best chance to offer better care, said Sarah Soroken, a triage and crisis therapist with the provider.

“They can’t just take in the recommendations and not do anything with them,” Soroken said in an interview.

A spokesman for Kaiser Permanente declined to comment at the time of publication.

The union began its California strike on Aug. 15 and accused Kaiser of violating a new state law ([S.B. 221](#)) to guarantee timely care for mental health patients. Kaiser members often wait months for follow-up appointments after an initial assessment, according to the HMO’s [own data](#).

Sen. Scott Wiener (D), the author of the timely care law, said that the settlement is a positive step to improve services.

“This resolution seems solid and creates a lot of leverage for the unions to make sure Kaiser is doing better,” he said in an interview.

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