

HAWAII NEWS

Striking Kaiser mental health therapists reject latest offer

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Kaiser Permanente's mental health therapists are entering the fifth week of a strike after contract negotiations on Monday with management failed to break an impasse. While Kaiser declined to discuss negotiations, the union says starting salaries and benefits for new hires are at the center of bargaining.

The approximately 60 clinicians, including psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses and

chemical dependency counselors have been on strike since Aug. 29. For months they have argued that severe understaffing at Kaiser's health clinics has led to overwhelming caseloads and that Kaiser needs to make compensation more attractive in order to attract new hires.

The union says that instead, Kaiser is doing the opposite, proposing lower starting salaries and slashing retirement benefits for new hires. Currently, employees receive pensions and contributions to individual retirement accounts. Kaiser is proposing to eliminate these benefits for new hires and instead provide them with a 401(k) plan or something similar, in which the company would match what employees contribute by just 3%, said Andrea Kumura, a licensed clinical social worker at Kaiser's Waipio clinic, who is helping lead negotiations on behalf of workers.

The clinicians are represented by the National Union of Healthcare Workers since unionizing about four years ago.

Kumura said Kaiser management had suggested during a recent bargaining session that the union not worry about what new hires would be receiving.

“We were so frustrated,” said Kumura, adding that Kaiser is missing the point. “We want you to hire more therapists, and the only way that you are going to get new people to come work for you is if you give the new hires good benefits and good wages, and what you are proposing is completely the opposite. You want to pay them less, and you want to give them less. That is not going to solve this problem of not having enough therapists for the patients that we have.”

Kaiser declined to comment on the union’s portrayal of negotiations or make anyone available for an interview, saying through a spokesperson that it chooses “to keep the negotiations at the table.”

But Kaiser says that it offers “market-competitive wages and benefits to attract and retain top-quality employees.” The company also pointed out that it had just made [Forbes’ Top 10 list](#) of best employers in Hawaii.

Kaiser hasn’t denied that it has a shortage of mental health employees, but has emphasized that those shortages exist nationwide.

The company says it has been working to hire more clinicians, hiring 25 new staff since 2021. Kaiser says that it also has created 11 new mental health clinical positions and additional support staff to be filled this year and in subsequent years. Kaiser says it plans to double its behavioral health staff by the end of 2025.

“It is unfortunate that NUHW leaders are asking our caring and compassionate mental health employees to walk away from their patients,” Kaiser said in a statement. “This is the second time in less than a year that the union has called on our 60 NUHW-represented mental health providers to strike in an attempt to disrupt care and create pressure at the bargaining table.”

Kaiser said it has been reaching out to its mental health patients whose appointments have been affected to reschedule or offer another option. The company says that about half of its behavioral health patients receive their care from mental health community providers who are not involved with the strike.

Kaiser and the union are not expected to resume negotiations until next week.