



SLIDE 1 OF 3

Emergency Room therapist Natalie Rogers speaks before Kaiser employees during a rally in front of the Santa Rosa hospital to support mental health employees demands for more staffing in the face of increased patients loads September 16, 2022. (John Burgess/The Press Democrat)

MARTIN ESPINOZA

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

October 21, 2022, 1:00AM | Updated 4 hours ago



A grueling, two-month labor walkout by scores of Kaiser Permanente mental health workers in Sonoma County has ended after the workers overwhelmingly approved a four-year contract, union officials announced late Thursday.

The agreement brings to a close a bitter labor battle the workers' union, National Union of Healthcare Workers, is calling the longest strike by mental health workers in U.S. history.

"It was difficult getting up and going on the (picket) line, juggling other responsibilities. We don't get paid when we're on strike," said Natalie Rogers, a licensed marriage and family therapist who works in the emergency department.

Rogers, who is also a member of the Santa Rosa City Council, said workers' resolve remained firm during the walkout. "We knew it was worth it. We knew why it was we were out there," she said.

In Sonoma County, NUHW represents about 100 therapists, psychologists, counselors and social workers in Sonoma County — 2,000 across numerous Kaiser facilities in Northern California. Workers went on strike in mid-August, protesting what they said were persistent staffing shortages that were causing major delays in treatment for patients and growing burnout among staff.

Voting on the contract ended at 7 p.m. Thursday, with 1,561 union members voting in favor and 36 against.

Throughout the strike, workers said the size of their paychecks was never the main issue and insisted that the real sticking point was overwhelming workloads that often led to major delays in patients getting appointments and endemic appointment cancellations.

The criticism of under-staffing and delays in care is nothing new.

A decade ago, state regulators found that Kaiser was not accurately tracking patient access to therapists and failing to ensure timely initial appointments; the state Department of Managed Health Care fined Kaiser \$4 million the following year, in 2013.

Kaiser agreed to pay the fine in 2014 and took steps to improve initial appointments. But over the years, Kaiser mental health workers have argued that the health care giant merely shifted resources to the front end of care, even as delays in follow-up or return appointments persisted and even worsened.

Kaiser has long argued that a severe crisis in mental health staffing has made it difficult to recruit more therapists, counselors and social workers.

On Thursday, the union said the new four-year contract, which is retroactive to September 2021 and expires September 2025, has essentially the same financial terms that had been agreed upon before the strike started on Aug. 15.

According to the union, the contract adds nearly two additional hours per week for therapists to respond to patient emails and voicemails, chart appointments, tailor treatment plans and communicate with social service agencies. Officials said the lack of time for these duties is a big reason for staff turnover rates, which have doubled over the past year.

The contract also increases extra pay for bilingual therapists from \$1 per hour to \$1.50 per hour; contains a commitment from Kaiser to hire more therapists and help reduce the wait times between appointments; and increases from 60 minutes to 90 minutes the amount of time therapists spend on initial assessments of children seeking mental health care.

The union said the contract includes five separate labor-management “Model of Care Committees” that will meet over the next six months to make recommendations related to Kaiser’s service model, including patient intakes, child and family therapy, and crisis care.

These committees will be different than previous ones in that Kaiser will be required to implement and fully fund the committees’ recommendations. Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg, who mediated contract negotiations, has agreed to help mediate solutions if the committees can’t come to an agreement.

Union officials said the committees will help Kaiser comply with SB 221, the new state law that requires all health insurers to provide therapy sessions within 10 business days unless the therapist determines that a longer wait is not detrimental.

The final wage agreement mirrors the initial terms, which adds an additional year to the contract. Wage increases, which include retroactive pay, call for a 4% increase in the first year; a 3% increase plus a 1% lump sum bonus in the second year; a 3% increase in the third year; and a 3% increase plus a 1% lump sum bonus in the fourth year.

Willow Thorsen, a Kaiser therapist said she was “relieved” to see the two-month strike come to an end, though she had hoped Kaiser would have agreed to decrease the number of patient intakes to allow for more return appointments. But she welcomed Steinberg’s involvement.

“I am cautiously optimistic that Steinberg’s involvement will mean that the model of care committee has more teeth and will be more meaningfully implemented,” she said.

Kaiser did not respond to a request for comment by The Press Democrat’s print deadline.