

# 'CRISIS MODE' AT PROVIDENCE ST. JOSEPH

## Caregivers at six hospitals report staffing shortfalls that undermine the quality of patient care

In fall and winter of 2018, the National Union of Healthcare Workers surveyed more than 550 caregivers at six hospitals owned by Providence St. Joseph Health: Providence Tarzana Medical Center, Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital, Petaluma Valley Hospital, Queen of the Valley Medical Center, St. Joseph Hospital in Eureka, and Redwood Memorial Hospital.

The results point to a widespread staffing crisis: 92 percent of bedside care staff — nursing assistants (CNAs), Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVNs), ER techs, and patient care attendants — report that their shift is understaffed at least one day every week. Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of all surveyed caregivers said that they work in crisis mode, trying to do too much too quickly. Nursing assistants report being routinely responsible for as many as 20 patients at a time, making it extremely difficult to do rounds, respond to call lights in a timely manner, and assist patients with toileting, bathing, and feeding.

Short-staffing creates immense pressure on caregivers to provide safe, high-quality patient care under difficult and often dangerous conditions. The California Department of Public Health has repeatedly cited the six Providence St. Joseph Health hospitals for failures to prevent patient injuries, like falls and pressure sores, and for falling short of state-mandated staffing ratios for registered nurses.

While Providence St. Joseph Health is positioning itself as a tech-focused innovator, a patient-care crisis is unfolding at the heart of the system's network of care. In recent years, caregivers have had to work hard to defend patient and worker safety in the face of policies that are designed to cut costs. At St. Joseph Hospital in Eureka, staff are fighting to reinstate 25 caregivers that were laid off — including all of the attendants who stay with patients who cannot be safely left alone. And NUHW blew the whistle on Providence St. Joseph Health's failure to provide the amount of charity care required by the California Attorney General as a condition of the 2016 merger.<sup>1</sup> As of January 2019, NUHW members at Queen of the Valley are bargaining their first contract. In spring and summer of 2019, NUHW members at Santa Rosa Memorial, Petaluma Valley, St. Joseph in Eureka, and Redwood Memorial will enter contract negotiations. Chronic short-staffing is sure to be a topic of discussion.

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During the last shift I served, we had one aide for more than 20 patients. This is normal at night now. A Code Blue resulted in our aide being called away for a good length of time. This left the floor without any help at all for me, the sitter, and for call lights and other important duties.... Imagine if, during this, another Code Blue takes place. There aren't enough staff to handle that or to see to the patients. Not at the same time. What if a Code Gray happens, and nobody can run to help? People are going to get hurt.

— Patient Care Attendant  
St. Joseph Hospital  
Eureka

When we are flexed, we are told to not clean certain areas of our hospital, such as nurse lounges, restrooms, kitchenettes, the dining room etc. In a hospital setting, ALL of those areas should always be cleaned.”

—EVS worker  
Redwood Memorial Hospital

# Key survey findings

**100%** One hundred percent of surveyed nursing assistants (CNAs) at Providence Tarzana and St. Joseph Eureka; respiratory therapists at Queen of the Valley; and lab assistants and ER techs at St. Joseph Eureka report being understaffed one or more day every week.

**40%** Forty percent of surveyed CNAs, LVNs, OR aides and patient care attendants say that staffing levels in their departments have gotten worse, or much worse, in the last three years.

**59%** Fifty-nine percent of surveyed EVS workers say that short staffing compromises the hospital's cleaning and infection control program on a weekly basis. In 2017 and 2018, four of the hospitals — Providence Tarzana, Santa Rosa Memorial, Queen of the Valley, and St. Joseph in Eureka — were penalized by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for having among the highest rates of patient injuries in the country. This includes hospital-acquired infections like C.diff, falls, and bedsores. Each hospital lost one percent of its Medicare reimbursements each year.<sup>2</sup>

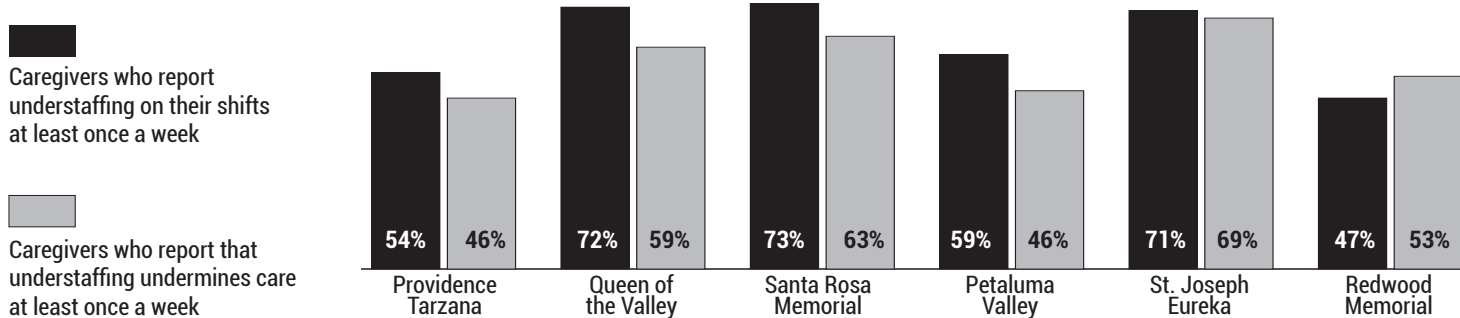
**20<sub>min</sub>** The average amount of time that a patient waits for their call light to be answered multiple times a week, according to nearly half (46 percent) of surveyed CNAs, LVNs, and patient care attendants.

**74%** Seventy-four percent of surveyed CNAs and patient care attendants say that they work in “crisis mode,” trying to do too much, too quickly. One third of all surveyed caregivers — from registration aides to cooks — witnessed errors resulting from short staffing on a weekly basis.

**20<sub>to</sub>1** CNAs report being routinely responsible for as many as 20 patients at a time, making it extremely difficult to do rounds, respond to call lights in a timely manner, and assist patients with toileting, bathing and feeding.

**63%** Caregivers describe staffing policies that routinely leave them shortstaffed — in particular, the practice of “flexing,” or calling off employees mid-shift. Sixty-three percent of respiratory therapists report that flexing leaves their department insufficiently prepared to respond to an emergency at least once a week.

**\$4,456** The estimated annual lost wages for CNAs who are flexed at least once a week (based on average wage across all six hospitals) totals \$4,546. Fifty-eight percent of surveyed CNAs report that they are routinely flexed or called off at least once a week. At Petaluma Valley that figure was even higher, at 84 percent. At Queen of the Valley and Providence Tarzana, this was true for 77 percent of CNAs.



568 survey responses were collected, a response rate of 22.4 percent. Survey results are broken out by job category if respondents represent at least 20 percent of all NUHW-represented members in that job category, at the six surveyed hospitals.



## WORKERS: HIGH STRESS, FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

Caregivers report a highly stressful and risky environment for patients – and for staff. More than 30 survey respondents wrote in to comment on a pattern of missed rest and meal breaks.

At St. Joseph Hospital in Eureka, management failed to provide coverage for the only monitor technician on duty, when she requested a bathroom break. Unwilling to leave her station and compromise her patients, the technician eventually urinated on herself at her station.

One CNA at Santa Rosa Memorial writes, "being understaffed has caused employees much stress to the point that many have had panic attacks at work."

In September 2018, a Santa Rosa Memorial CNA left alone with a psychiatric patient was shoved against a wall before the patient jumped out of a second-story window. In 2018, Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital and St. Joseph Hospital in Eureka laid off all of their patient care attendants, leaving remaining staff to pick up the slack.

**“**I cannot describe the amount of stress and anxiety that comes with being the only person on a shift, not having any relief for a break or to even use the restroom. When I have missed getting my breaks because I'm short staffed, my manager has come and told me not to forget to take my breaks like I had a choice.

– Caregiver  
St. Joseph Hospital Eureka

# Public health agency sounds alarm

It's not only caregivers who are sounding the alarm about unsafe staffing: in 2018, the California Department of Public Health received higher-than-average numbers of complaints for each of the six hospitals. Petaluma Valley, Redwood Memorial and Providence Tarzana each generated complaints at nearly three times the rate of comparable hospitals across the state.<sup>3</sup> In the last three years, the hospitals have racked up numerous health and safety violations that resulted in avoidable patient injuries — including eight at Santa Rosa Memorial alone.

Overworking caregivers has had dire consequences for patients. In 2013, CDPH launched an investigation after a patient at Queen of the Valley slipped into a persistent vegetative state after going into respiratory distress and suffering an anoxic brain injury. CDPH determined that the patient had been in “immediate jeopardy,” meaning that the hospital’s failure to adequately monitor her put her in danger of serious injury or death. When interviewed, a caregiver stated that she “was so busy that shift she was not able to look at [the patient’s] chart for physician orders, or [patient’s] history ... everything got so hectic, that she was unable to document anything.” The hospital was required to pay a \$100,000 administrative penalty.<sup>4</sup>

“Most of the time we have two care partners for 24 patients. I hardly ever give a full bath anymore as I don’t have time; call lights go off continuously for more than 10 minutes and the patients get angry. Passing trays takes forever and in general the quality of work life has gone way down.

—CNA  
Santa Rosa  
Memorial Hospital

## AVOIDABLE INJURIES

### PATIENT SAFETY VIOLATIONS AT SIX PROVIDENCE ST. JOSEPH HOSPITALS<sup>5</sup>

#### November 2014

**Santa Rosa Memorial**  
Patient with fall risk fell from bed and bled from amputated leg.

#### March 2015

**Santa Rosa Memorial**  
Failure to check patient or track pressure sores.

#### June 2015

**Santa Rosa Memorial**  
Failure to check patient resulted in pressure sore.

#### February 2016

**Queen of the Valley**  
Patient fell twice, second time resulting in hip fracture that required surgery.

#### April 2016

**Santa Rosa Memorial**  
Patient fell and hit their head after getting out of wheelchair, which was not properly alarmed.

#### October 2016

**Santa Rosa Memorial**  
Patient developed pressure sore from Bipap mask.

#### January 2017

**Santa Rosa Memorial**  
Six acute patients awaiting admission were left on stretchers in ED for as long as 20 hours, instead of being moved to a hospital bed.

#### June 2017

**Santa Rosa Memorial**  
Nurse without pediatric certification assigned to pediatric patient.

#### July 2017

**St. Joseph Eureka**  
Patient twisted knee trying to get out of bed. Staff said patient “told her she called for help but staff did not respond so she transferred herself.”

#### July 2017

**Queen of the Valley**  
Failure to prevent pressure sores in two patients.

#### August 2017

**Queen of the Valley**  
Bed alarm didn't go off. 96-year-old patient got out of bed and fell, sustained neck fracture.

#### December 2017

**Providence Tarzana**  
Facility did not report pressure sore within required timeframe.

#### December 2017

**Petaluma Valley**  
Failure to assess patient's fall risk. Patient sustained left hip fracture while transferring from chair to bed unassisted, requiring surgery.

#### January 2018

**Queen of the Valley**  
Patient fell and broke hip, injury was not properly recorded.

#### February 2018

**Santa Rosa Memorial**  
Patient fell and sustained hip fracture after getting out of bed unassisted.

For more information, contact NUHW Researcher Sonya Rifkin at [srifkin@nuhw.org](mailto:srifkin@nuhw.org).

## NOTES

1. California Attorney General's final conditions for proposed change in governance of Providence Health & Services and St. Joseph Health System: [bit.ly/ag-conditions-psjh](http://bit.ly/ag-conditions-psjh). NUHW letter to CA Attorney General: [bit.ly/nuhw-becerra-2018](http://bit.ly/nuhw-becerra-2018)
2. Kaiser Health News: 751 Hospitals Hit With Safety Penalties For 2018: Data Table: [bit.ly/cms-safety-penalties-2018](http://bit.ly/cms-safety-penalties-2018)
3. CDPH determines comparable hospitals and statewide averages “based on facility type and size.” Comparisons available by searching the online Cal Health Find database.
4. CDPH documentation of Immediate Jeopardy case, St. Joseph Hospital, Eureka. Complaint CA00399624: [bit.ly/qotv-immjeopardy](http://bit.ly/qotv-immjeopardy)
5. Documentation obtained from CDPH Santa Rosa District Office and available online at [bit.ly/psjh-violations-2014-18](http://bit.ly/psjh-violations-2014-18)