Kaiser mental health workers set to strike Monday in Northern California

By Rachel Swan

Mental health workers at Kaiser Permanente in Northern California planned to begin a strike over workload issues.

Deborah Catsavas, senior vice president of human resources at Kaiser Permanente Northern California, said the hospital was facing a near-death battle recruiting new clinicians.

"Now they're not able to hire people as quickly as those that are leaving," Catsavas said.

She said patient demand has been so high and there isn't enough staff to meet it.

"Despite all that we are doing we, like others, are challenged to meet the demand and know more must be done. We are focused on continuing to recruit new clinicians," Catsavas said.

Catsavas said the hospital launched a $500,000 initiative to virtual care. She said the hospital has improved access for patients through virtual care.

According to state law, Kaiser has to provide timely health care to patients, and therefore cannot suspend mental and behavioral health services because of the strike.

Reasons include high workloads and excessive wait times — weeks or even months, according to union officials in negotiations Saturday.

The union said it was moving ahead with the strike Monday morning.

More than 2,000 Kaiser mental health workers in Northern California are scheduled to participate in the strike, union officials said. Hospital workers in San Francisco, San Jose, Sacramento and Fresno were also scheduled to participate in the strike, union officials said.

Kaiser mental health workers are divided into two bargaining units, the union said. The hospital said it was offering an equitable agreement that is good for our therapists and our patients,

"The first time we agreed to this kind of strike, because the impact was going to be enormous," Catsavas said.

The union said it was moving ahead with the strike Monday morning.

It was unclear Monday how many Kaiser mental health workers would actually show up to the picket line.

"I am interested in trying to make sure that we can work with Kaiser to come to a solution. The union leadership remains open to resolving this issue, but the issue remains," Catsavas said.

Jessica Flores (she/her) is a San Francisco Chronicle staff reporter. She can be reached at jessica.flores@sfchronicle.com.