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THE SACRAMENTO BEE

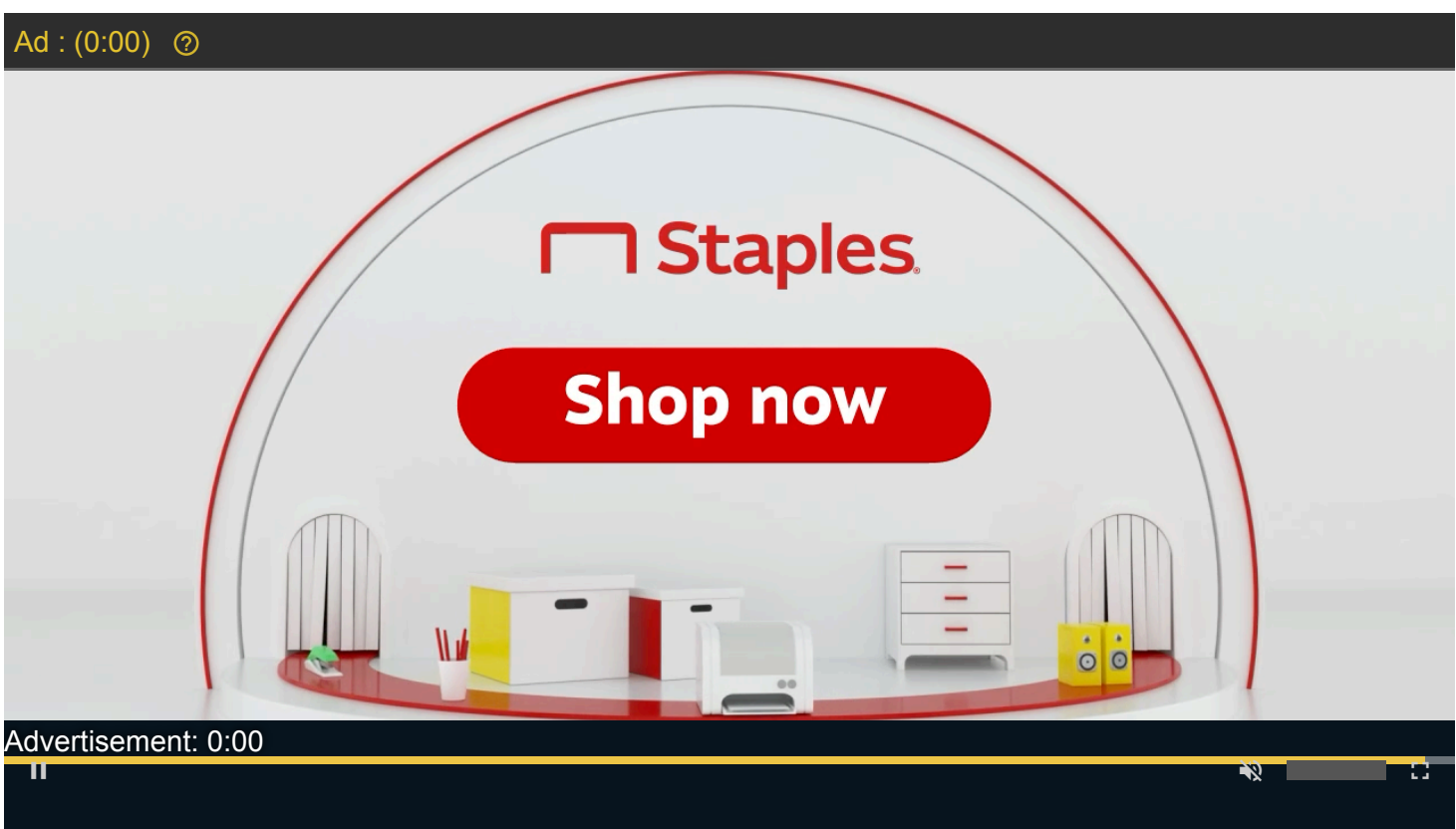
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HEALTH & MEDICINE

Kaiser will return to contract talks with union of 2,000-plus mental health workers in CA

BY CATHIE ANDERSON
SEPTEMBER 06, 2022 4:37 PM



Kaiser mental health clinicians represented by the National Union of Healthcare Workers strike Aug. 15, 2022, at Kaiser Permanente on Morse Avenue in Arden Arcade. About 2,000 will to strike in Northern California, according to the NUHW. BY SARA NEVIS



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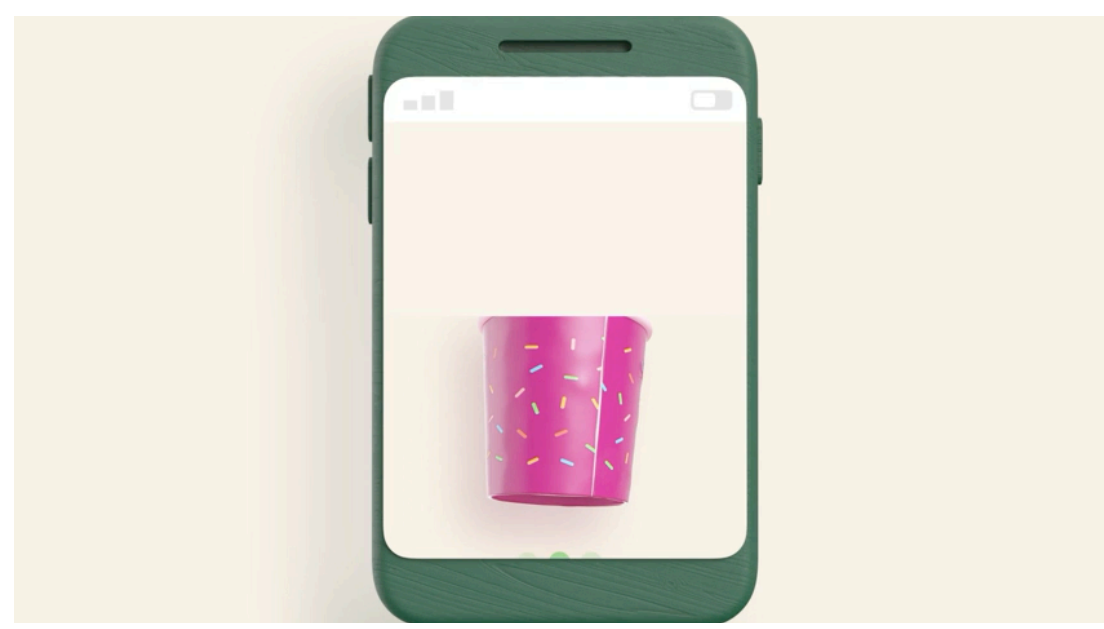
Kaiser Permanente reached out to striking mental health clinicians to request bargaining sessions on Thursday and Friday, saying the company remains “committed to reaching a fair and equitable agreement that’s good for our therapists and our patients.”

The National Union of Healthcare Workers represents a little more than 2,000 [psychologists, social workers and counselors](#) providing behavioral health services to Kaiser members. They have been [on strike in Northern California](#) since Aug. 15.

“In the days leading up to the decision by NUHW leadership to go forward with their strike, Kaiser Permanente was working hard to reach agreement on a new contract,” company leaders said in a statement released Tuesday. “Our last offer, presented the weekend before the strike, includes an economic proposal that NUHW had previously agreed to, with competitive annual wage increases, a lump sum cash payment and a retroactive cash payment of up to \$6,300.”

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The company also said its last proposal had addressed the union’s concerns about working conditions. Kaiser had offered to allow the clinicians to spend 18% of their time on tasks other than seeing patients, up from 15%. Kaiser officials said they extended the deadline on their last offer.

NUHW President Sal Rosselli said the union’s bargaining team would meet with Kaiser on Thursday.

“Our members have shown incredible resolve and remain determined to strike for as long as it takes to make Kaiser meet the mental health care needs of its patients,” he said. “We had already agreed to Kaiser’s wage proposal. This strike is about patient care, and the settlement offer that Kaiser made prior to the start of the strike would not have addressed the severe understaffing of Kaiser mental health clinics that forces patients to wait months for mental health therapy sessions in violation of state law and has resulted in therapists leaving Kaiser in droves over the past year.”

Kaiser’s behavioral health workers had told The Bee in interviews over the phone and on the picket line that their main concern was not pay. They said they are determined to improve working conditions that have caused many of their colleagues to leave the company, high turnover that they say results in burnout for the clinicians who remain.

Ken Rogers, a Kaiser psychologist who practices in Elk Grove, said the 3% increase in what Kaiser is calling administrative work would be an “incremental change” that would do little to attract and retain behavioral health clinicians.

“Even if we write the notes by hand in the session, we have to record them in the computer and they have to be a certain format,” Rogers said. “Sometimes we have to check ... their behavioral health statistics: the numbers on questionnaires, things they filled out. We have to ask them about that. My job is actually pretty involved when it comes to those sorts of things. It’s really not: You come in. You sit on the couch. We have 50 minutes, and then we’re done.”

Because the insurer does not have enough therapists, Rogers and others have said patients are waiting two or three months for follow-up appointments that they should get within 10 business days. All too often, Rogers said, he and his colleagues are scheduling patients into their lunch hours and into time set aside for that “administrative work.”

Kaiser has said that turnover in its behavioral health services unit is no greater than the national average for all health care workers.

“Over the past five years we have added hundreds of new mental health clinicians to our workforce,” company leaders said in an earlier statement. “We’ve worked hard to expand the number of therapists in California and are investing \$30 million to build a pipeline to educate and train new mental health professionals across the state. We have significantly expanded our ability to provide virtual care to patients who want it, increasing convenience and access.”

The [California Department of Managed Health Care](#) has launched an investigation into whether the company is providing timely access to behavioral health care amid the strike. Consumers can reach the DMHC at 888-466-2219 or at [www.healthhelp.ca.gov](#).

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CATHIE ANDERSON
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Cathie Anderson covers health care for The Bee. Growing up, her blue-collar parents paid out of pocket for care. She joined The Bee in 2002, with roles including business columnist and features editor. She previously worked at papers including the Dallas Morning News, Detroit News and Austin American-Statesman.

HEALTH & MEDICINE

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BY CATHIE ANDERSON
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