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HEALTH & MEDICINE

Update: 10-week Kaiser strike ends as California mental health clinicians OK contract

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

Screenshot

Kaiser Permanente's mental health providers voted 1,561 to 36 to ratify a new labor contract that they said would radically improve the company's ability to hire and retain people working in their field.

The vote officially brings the longest strike by mental health care workers in U.S. history to a close after 10 weeks, leaders of the National Union of Healthcare Workers in Northern California said in an announcement Thursday. Picketing workers endured record heat on several days of their protests.

Contract talks had restarted briefly, but labor and management couldn't reach a deal. Then late last week, Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg entered as a mediator and managed to negotiate a contract.

Union members Jennifer Browning and Kenneth Rogers said the job action was draining but ultimately paid off. The company and union had worked out wage increases before the strike began but had reached an impasse when it came to changes that therapists wanted to improve working conditions.

"It took much longer than it should have to reach this agreement, but, in the end, we succeeded in securing important improvements in patient care that Kaiser negotiators told us across the bargaining table that they'd never agree to," said Browning, a licensed clinical social worker for Kaiser in Roseville. "At a time when there are so few appointment cancellations because we're seeing patients remotely, giving us enough time to perform all of our patient care duties is going to help keep a lot of us at Kaiser, and it's going to help Kaiser hire more therapists."

In a statement issued Friday, Kaiser management said they were pleased that the new contract was approved and that therapists had returned to work: "We appreciate our therapists' confidence in this agreement, which addresses the concerns they expressed, while upholding Kaiser Permanente's commitment that any agreement must protect and enhance access to mental health for our members. We are glad to have all our employees back, caring for their patients."

The four-year agreement gives Kaiser's 2,000-plus therapists nearly two hours more each week to perform critical patient care duties, Rogers said, basically the same increase in time that the union had sought when bargaining two prior contracts.

"Patients haven't been able to be seen because the staffing hasn't been good, because people have been leaving KP," said Rogers, a psychologist who practices in Elk Grove. "In making peace with the union, there's a real opportunity for KP to start to rehabilitate its image around employee job satisfaction. ... If you don't have enough time to do your job, you're not going to stay with that employer. That's the bottom line."

Therapists now will have about seven hours a week to take care of things like responding to patient emails and voicemails, tailoring treatment plans, communicating with social service agencies or court officers, and charting appointments, the union said.

Jenny Butera, who treats patients in Kaiser's downtown Sacramento offices, said that staffing ranks are so depleted that her clients are waiting two months between appointments.

"These are regular therapy sessions where the standard of care is you provide weekly or every other week therapy," Butera said, "and it's not until about 12 to 15 sessions where a person develops that therapeutic bond with the therapist and they trust the therapist and they start to

work on things ... (and) would finally start to get better. At best, we could probably see a patient six times a year.”

Kaiser to hire more therapists

As part of the contract deal, Kaiser agreed to hire additional therapists and expand treatment programs that allow certain patients better access to appointments over a shorter period of treatment.

If Kaiser is making the necessary number of hires, Rogers said, he and other mental health clinicians will know it because they will be seeing clients with greater frequency over a year’s time. and therapists won’t be routinely working 60 hours a week to meet patient needs.

“A patient who maybe I didn’t have the time to see in four weeks, now I have the time to see him three or two,” Rogers said. “I’m going to notice these kinds of changes based upon our hiring and retention practices over the next few years.”

As part of the labor agreement, Kaiser also said it would work with therapists to expand the availability of crisis services at its clinics and increase the time that therapists who work with children have to do initial assessments.

13% salary increase over four years

Kaiser’s leaders also agreed to form five labor-management committees to study areas such as patient intake, child and family therapy, and crisis care over the next six months. In testimony before public officials and interviews with The Bee, Kaiser members have said the company’s intake process has stymied their efforts to get help for either themselves, their children or both.

Rogers said he will likely end up serving on at least one of the committees, and he said he’s optimistic and believes that Kaiser wants to do the work to improve patient care in its behavioral services unit. The company has been the target of two state probes into customer complaints about behavioral health care.

NUHW has been without a new contract for a little more than one year, and Kaiser has agreed to make wage increases retroactive. They will receive raises of 4% for the first year of the deal and 3% for each of the next three years. The company also will pay a 1% lump sum bonus in the second and fourth year of the contract. Bilingual therapists will receive extra pay of \$1.50 per hour, up from \$1 an hour, as part of the company’s effort to ensure patients have access to medical workers who speak a language they are comfortable using.