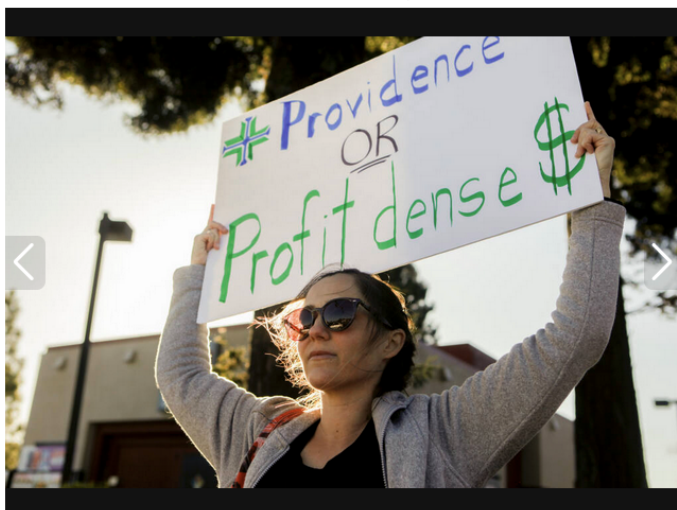


Close to Home: Only a lawsuit can save Petaluma's birthing center

The health care district should immediately file suit against Providence to enforce its contract that requires the birthing center to remain open until at least 2025. | 1



SLIDE 1 OF 2

Caitlin Jack, a registered nurse in the obstetrics department at Petaluma Valley Hospital, took part in a rally Feb. 15 protesting the pending closure of the maternity ward in Petaluma. (CRISSY PASCUAL/ARGUS-COURIER STAFF)

JIM GOERLICH AND SAL ROSSELLI

JIM GOERLICH IS PRESIDENT OF THE PETALUMA STAFF NURSE PARTNERSHIP. SAL ROSSELLI IS PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF HEALTHCARE WORKERS. April 28, 2023, 12:00AM

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The Petaluma Health Care District has said all the right things when it comes to the imminent closing of Petaluma Valley Hospital's birthing center. Now, it must take immediate action to prevent Providence from shuttering the center as scheduled on Monday, May 1.

The district should immediately file a lawsuit to enforce its contract that requires the birthing center to remain open until at least 2025.

This is a situation where irreparable harm could be done if the birthing center is closed, which gives the district enormous leverage and increases the likelihood of it getting immediate injunctive relief. That leverage goes away if the district fails to file suit before the birthing center is closed on Monday.

And make no mistake, Providence is closing the birthing center on May 1 — not "interrupting services" as it has said in the press. As the leaders of the two unions that represent the vast majority of caregivers at the hospital, we know that birthing center workers are being permanently reassigned and that managers have told workers the center won't be reopening.

We don't blame the health care district for Providence's greed and deceit. The district's elected representatives, and CEO Ramona Faith, have rightfully rejected Providence's plan to close the

birthing center and conveyed the community's outrage at Providence for violating the contract it signed to purchase the hospital.

But outrage is not enough when action is available.

Seeking legal recourse is certainly a better option than capitulating to Providence and allowing it to divert emergency births to Petaluma Valley's severely understaffed Emergency Department — a move that would help Providence's bottom line, but put mothers, babies and other patients at risk.

Providence has no excuse to close the birthing center. Its agreement to purchase the hospital, which took effect on Jan. 1, 2021, clearly states that Providence "shall operate the Family Birthing Center until a minimum of five (5) years after the Closing Date."

And, it clearly has the resources to maintain operations and avoid creating a 41-mile maternity desert between San Rafael and Santa Rosa. Providence has \$10 billion in cash reserves and has netted \$1.38 million profit at Petaluma Valley since buying the hospital at the beginning of 2021, according to reports filed with the state.

There is more at stake for Petaluma residents than the fate of the birthing center. If Providence is allowed to get away with violating the terms of its own agreement to buy Petaluma Valley Hospital, what would prevent it from doing it again? In a recent *Close to Home* commentary, Faith, the district's CEO, wrote that Providence has also communicated that it "may stop providing all inpatient OB-GYN services at Petaluma Valley, which is a 20-year commitment in our (purchase) agreement."

For generations, the Petaluma Health Care District has been entrusted to provide and preserve hospital services for the residents of Southern Sonoma County. It can still fulfill that duty, but only if it files a lawsuit to enforce its contract and make Providence honor its commitment — before it's too late.

Jim Goerlich is a registered nurse and the president of the Petaluma Staff Nurse Partnership, an independent union that represents nurses at Petaluma Valley Hospital. Sal Rosselli is the president of the National Union of Healthcare Workers, a union that represents more than 16,000 healthcare workers in California, including 160 caregivers at Petaluma Valley Hospital.