

Kaiser Vacaville mental health staff joins strike for improved patient access



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PUBLISHED: August 23, 2022 at 6:00 p.m. | UPDATED: August 24, 2022 at 6:12 a.m.

More than 20 Kaiser Permanente nurses and mental health clinicians picketed outside Kaiser's Vacaville campus Tuesday as the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) continues to bargain for decreased wait times for mental health patients' followup appointments.

The protest was one of eight held outside Kaiser hospitals throughout Northern California Tuesday, as NUHW begins its second week of protests to demand increased staffing and shorter wait times for patients, among other things. It was the second protest for Vacaville, having first participated Thursday.



Mental health professionals at Kaiser Permanente medical facilities in Solano County acknowledge motorists as they honk their horns in support as they drive by their picket line Tuesday in front of the Kaiser Permanente Vacaville Medical Center.(Joel Rosenbaum / The Reporter)

Approximately 23 mental health clinicians lined the sidewalk along Quality Drive in front of the Kaiser Vacaville Campus, wearing red and carrying signs with slogans such as "Patient Health, Not Corporate Wealth," "Patients Before Profits" and "Safe Staffing Now."

April Brownell, a clinical psychologist and Vacaville shop steward for NUHW, said the strike was all about patients.

"We've been bargaining with Kaiser for over a year now," she said. "We haven't had much movement. We're really looking for better access for our patients."

Brownell said patients often wait six to eight weeks for appointments.

“We’re out here as long as it takes to ensure sustainable working conditions and improved access to mental health care,” she said.

Brownell works part time as a case manager for the Young Teen Intensive Outpatient Program, which serves youth ages 11 to 13 in the Napa/Solano area who have been hospitalized for self-harm or thoughts of self-harm or harm to others, or are at risk of hospitalization. She works with youth as well as their schools and other treatment providers.

“As a case manager, I should be seeing these children weekly, if not more,” she said. “Currently, based on availability of my schedule, I see them every two, three, four weeks. That results in subsequent returns or needing higher levels of treatment because I’m not able to stabilize them with the time I have with my schedule.”

Additionally, Brownell said it has caused stress for mental health providers who work one to two extra hours each day to cover for lack of staffing and perform care tasks.

“This is unpaid time,” she said. “We work through lunches, don’t take bathroom breaks because we’re trying to meet the demands of answering messages, returning phone calls.”



Bart Pense, a triage clinician at Kaiser Permanente in Fairfield, stands at the intersection of Vaca Valley Parkway and Quality Drive Tuesday as he participates in a strike with his fellow mental health professionals against the health care company to get it to properly fund mental healthcare. (Joel Rosenbaum / The Reporter)

This, Brownell said, has also led to an exodus of employees.

“We’ve had 400 therapists, just in the past year, leave,” she said. “Kaiser’s only replaced 200 of those.”

Brownell is particularly concerned Kaiser has not met the requirements of Senate Bill 221 by Sen. Scott Weiner, which went into effect July 1 and mandates that all mental health patients receive followup appointments within 10 days. She feels Kaiser is not adhering to this or hiring enough therapists to meet the demand.

In a statement, Kaiser officials wrote that the organization supports the intent behind SB 221 but that the implementation was challenging “for all health plans and providers given the overall demand for mental health care and substance use disorder services — exacerbated by the pandemic — and the shortage of trained professionals both nationally and in California.”

“We are meeting regularly with the DMHC (Department of Managed Health Care) as they continue to provide guidance for implementation of the new law to ensure we fully understand the requirements regarding documentation and reporting,” per the statement.

Bart Pense, a triage clinician at Kaiser’s psychiatry clinic in Fairfield, said he takes crisis calls for patients seeking mental health treatment.

“We don’t have enough clinicians, and they don’t have enough appointments in their schedule to schedule timely access for our patients in crisis,” he said. “We have an increase of people going to the emergency room because we just don’t have access to ongoing care.”

Pense called the eight-week timeframe for patients to see clinicians “egregious” and “outside the standard of care for people who have chronic mental health issues.” He said this has created anxiety for patients and also clinicians who have up to 300 individuals on their caseloads.

“I’d like to see Kaiser come back to the bargaining table,” he said. “I’d like to see them come back and have a serious conversation on quality care for our patients.”

Robynn Thomas, a licensed clinical social worker in Vacaville, said she works in an IOP for adolescents who have eating disorders. It is an at-risk population, and when she has four to six weeks between appointments, she said a lot of crises can occur in that time.

“There’s a lot of things that could be avoided,” she said. “They just need more support. We’ve been asking for it for years, and this (strike) is always our last resort.”

Thomas, holding up a sign that said “Caution: Patients at Risk,” said she and her colleagues working longer hours than scheduled leads to a lot of burnout and not much improvement for patients.

“You don’t get to see the positive payoff of your work,” she said.

Additionally, Thomas said Kaiser has lost therapists who specialize in particular areas, such as care for transgender patients, resulting in patients not getting the proper care.

“Now we’re trying to fill the void that they’ve left, specialty services that we just don’t know enough about,” she said. “Those patients are getting really poor care.”

Thomas hopes clinicians will have more of a say over their schedules and be able to see patients more frequently.

Brownell wants overall improvements in access to mental health care patients, including more return appointments within the 10-day timeframe.

“We just are tired of apologizing to our patients every time we see them, when we’re scheduling their return appointment, we’re looking at six to eight weeks,” she said. “We need something better. As long as we can get people in sooner and we hire more therapists and we have working conditions where therapists want to work for Kaiser and remain working for Kaiser, then I’d be happy.”

In a statement, Kaiser officials wrote that the organization appreciates its mental health professionals and clinicians but felt the strike was counterproductive.

“This strike and this disruption to patient care does not need to happen,” Kaiser wrote. “While NUHW claims it is fighting for increased access to care, its primary demand is for union members to spend less time seeing patients. Our patients cannot afford a proposal that significantly reduces the time available to care for them and their mental health needs.”

Regarding the mental health clinician shortage, Kaiser wrote that it has hired 200 net new clinicians since Jan. 2021, launched a \$500,000 recruiting initiative to source and hire clinicians to fill more than 1,000 open positions and spent \$30 million to build a pipeline to train new mental health professionals.

Officials wrote that they hoped both sides could come to a fair agreement.

“We were very close to an agreement the week of August 8; unfortunately, union leaders were intent on this strike,” officials wrote. “We encourage the union to return to the table as we remain committed to reaching a fair and equitable agreement that is good for our clinicians and our patients.”