

# Alton Mental Health Center nurses issue rally cry for State action on unsafe conditions, DHS responds

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Nurses employed at the Alton Mental Health Center gathered along IL-140 outside the facility's grounds on the morning of June 2, 2023, with the support of other colleagues and loved ones, united in a rally cry for action from the state regarding unsafe work conditions and unfair labor practices that they have been forced to work under for months now; some say even years.

Represented by the Illinois Nurses Association (INA), the nurses shared how the Alton Mental Health Center management has taken advantage of the availability of agency or "traveling" nurses to fill the critical workforce shortage on-site rather than filling the current 17 full-time nursing staff vacancies.

The INA is the union representing State of Illinois nurses employed at the mental health facility, as well as healthcare workers in both the private and public sectors throughout Illinois. Michelle Logue is one of the nurses employed at Alton Mental Health Center represented by the local INA/RC 23. A past president, serving eight years in that position, Logue continues as a co-chair and as one of its union stewards.

"We've been short for years and years," Logue said. "I've been here for 25 years, and it's never not been short. But it's ridiculous



Nurses rallied outside the Alton Mental Health Center facility where they work on June 2 with the hopes of a call for action from the State of Illinois regarding the unsafe work conditions and unfair labor practices they have been working under. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)

now. We can't get nurses hired. And it's not that there are not nurses out there applying. We've got our agency nurses wanting to apply and they can't even. Now, you have to ask yourself, why? Where is the problem as to why even they can't get on?"

Alton Mental Health Center, located at 4500 College Ave. in Alton is a State of Illinois forensic psychiatric hospital and healthcare facility. And because the vacancies are state employee positions, job postings must first be approved and posted by the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) before they can be filled.

INA member nurse Toni Holly said, "HR blames the state at our INA meetings, stating that they [DHS] are not approving our nurse vacancies for HR to publish and get

nurses in. Whether or not that's true, that's been the excuse for years."

"I've even asked who the point person is [at DHS]," said fellow INA nurse Tina Broyles. "Why can't we find out who that person is? Why aren't these positions getting approved? Why do we have to work with one nurse for 44 patients? That's definitely unsafe."

Several of the INA representative nurses at the rally noted that the current staffing ratio is one nurse for every 44 patients. Under normal conditions, Broyles explained, they are asked to work 1 nurse for 22 patients, "which is hard enough."

Nurses are also being forced to cover two units during each shift at the facility because of the staffing shortage. They stressed that this unsafe working condition puts both staff and patients at extreme risk. The situation is further exacerbated by the mandated 16-hour shifts the nurses are having to take on because of the critical shortage.

"These are not your normal medical patients, although many have medical issues as well," Broyles further noted. "These are criminally insane patients that have been sent to us for committing some kind of crime or unfit at the time to understand the court system."

"How many weeks do we have to work 16-hour shifts, day after day after day, and go out during a violent situation, being mentally fatigued, while still having to make the right judgment calls?" Broyles asked.

The nurses said that, because

of the nature of their work and the extended shifts, it's inevitable that fatigue sets in, both physically and mentally. With each shift, there's almost always a medication error or an injury, one of the nurses added.

"Patients and staff are getting attacked because we don't have enough staff to handle the violent, forensic mentally ill patients here," nurse Michelle Mincy said. "We currently, as of today, have five off work who have been injured, and another 12 vacancies. That means we're working 17 short." The INA pointed out that there are typically 26 nurses working.

"We need these positions filled, and with permanent full-time staff, not agency or traveling nurses," added Logue. "Agency nurses come and then go, and that just increases the workplace safety and critical shortage issues."

The IBJ requested input immediately following the Alton rally on the situation from the Illinois Department of Human Services. DHS spokesperson Marisa Kollias provided this further information:

"At IDHS, we are always working to staff up as quickly as possible as we have faced a nationwide staffing shortage. To address these shortages, we have invested in hiring strategies. We are committed to fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment that is essential for our workforce. We look forward to a productive, continued partnership with INA."

Later in June, the IBJ reached out to Kollias again for an update on hiring action and further clarification on the strategies the state agency was using to fill these critical vacancies. This was the information Kollias shared in response to the second request:

"At IDHS, we are working tirelessly to advance our hiring strategies: We have implemented virtual hiring processes which include conducting online interviews, virtual job fairs, and video assessments to streamline the recruitment process. We host job fairs across the state, invest in our digital marketing hiring plan and continue to build relationships with universities, professional associations, and other

talent sources to maintain a pool of qualified individuals who can be recruited quickly when vacancies arise. Additionally, we ask for feedback from candidates and hiring managers to identify areas for improvement in the recruitment process. Regular evaluations, surveys, and debriefing sessions help refine hiring practices, address concerns, and enhance the overall effectiveness of staffing efforts. With these hiring practices, the agency aims to attract a diverse pool of qualified candidates, expedite the recruitment process, and ensure that the right individuals are hired for various roles across the organization. From March through May, we have made over 1000 hires."

In an official statement from the INA issued prior to the rally, it was noted that Alton union steward Jean Campbell, RN, had previously filed numerous unfair labor grievances against the facility.

"Alton management continues utilizing agency nurses and not hiring INA nurses," Campbell had said in her grievance filings. "There are no postings and no substantive effort to fill vacancies. They just continue to bring in more agency, giving them preferential treatment over INA." Campbell further pointed out that the agency nurses are not adequately trained for the work at Alton Mental Health Center, so INA nurses often end up with double the work to do.

"We are exposed to possible danger every day. We have one-on-one contact with all our patients and are the front line to all the behaviors or mental episodes that occur. We would like fair pay for our job as well as safe working conditions," said Broyles.

When asked what the hopes coming out of the rally were, concurrence from the nurses was clear:

"Permanent staff. And an awareness that we're working unsafely."

"Maybe then it will open their eyes and realize something must be done. People go to the hospital constantly or are off because they're hurt. We have to have nurses hired. There has to be a change," Broyles concluded.

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