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Bob Schoonover

January 13, 2022

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
State Capitol Building, 1st Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Newsom:

As president of the more than 98,000-member SEIU Local 721, I'm writing to express my grave concern about the dangerous California Department of Public Health (CDPH) guidance released on January 8 permitting the state's hospitals and other health facilities to force COVID-positive staff who are asymptomatic back to work without isolation periods or testing.

This guidance endangers healthcare workers across the state, including the thousands of nurses, clinic workers, and other frontline healthcare professionals in Southern California who are SEIU 721 members.

Since the emergence of COVID-19 in our communities, we've known that asymptomatic carriers can spread the virus. Because of that, California healthcare facilities have required doctors, nurses, and other staff known to be carrying COVID-19 — including those not showing symptoms — to isolate and test negative before returning to work.

This new CDPH standard allows healthcare administrators to upend those practices at a time when hospitals, clinics, and other facilities face an unprecedented wave of patients infected with COVID-19 as the highly infectious Omicron variant rips through California. At health clinics where our members work — which often serve low-income communities and the most vulnerable patients — we've seen up to 30% of staff absent on certain days recently, largely because of COVID-19 infections.

Now is not the time to scale back measures that contain COVID-19's spread in our healthcare facilities and to force workers who are already strained to put their colleagues and patients at risk.

There are safer ways to handle current staffing shortages, including by cancelling non-critical healthcare procedures and elective surgeries and tightening controls on visitation. **Most importantly, it is time to invest in California's healthcare facilities and fund efforts to recruit and retain full-time healthcare workers to weather this crisis and future ones.**

Additionally, we write today to urge you to provide all workers with COVID supplemental paid sick leave, so that we can keep ourselves, our families, and our patients safe. This move would allow healthcare workers to take the time they need to recover from an infection and help reduce the Omicron variant's rapid spread in our communities that is leading to a surge in cases and patients requiring hospitalization.

For too long, the hospitals and clinics our members work in have been short-handed, with administrators trying to save money by contracting out vital services to private corporations and relying on tools like nurse registries and traveling nurses.

<http://www.seiu721.org>

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The COVID-19 pandemic, including the Omicron wave, has shown that these practices are no substitute for having an adequate number of fairly compensated professional healthcare staff who are treated with dignity and respect and who are not expected to overwork themselves or operate in unsafe conditions when patient intake is high.

Gov. Newsom, you have referred to healthcare workers as “heroes” in the past. I am asking you to please show these workers that you believe they are heroes by doing everything in your power to protect and invest in them.

I will close by leaving you with testimony from healthcare workers who are concerned about the new CDPH guidelines and are asking for your support:

Dr. Ileana Meza, a registered nurse practitioner at LAC + USC Medical Center: "At LAC-USC, the largest public hospital in LA, our staffing levels are low because many of my colleagues are out sick with Omicron. Some patients are waiting 20 hours to be seen in the emergency room. The solution to this is not forcing infected workers back into our hospital and into other health facilities, increasing the risk of spread. It's taking common-sense steps like cancelling non-critical healthcare procedures and elective surgeries, reducing face-to-face visits of a routine or annual nature to telehealth, tightening controls on visitation, and investing in the recruitment and retention of healthcare workers."

Bruce Campbell, Clinical Laboratory Scientist at Riverside University Health System: “We’ve got to plan ahead and make sure our future is secured. The surge caused by the Omicron variant shows short-staffing and relying on tools like nurse registries and traveling nurses leaves health facilities vulnerable. It’s time to start investing in the recruitment and retention of healthcare workers so we can handle the current crisis and future ones. Forcing healthcare workers to return to work infected with COVID-19 only puts patients and fellow staff at risk.”

Rene Espinosa, Nursing Assistant II at Ventura County Medical Center: “We are seeing a huge number of patients because of the Omicron wave that is causing strain on our staff. One thing that would help reduce the community spread that is driving this: COVID supplemental paid sick leave for all workers. This move would allow infected workers, including health staff, to fully recover from the virus and be confident they are not spreading it to others on the job.”

Sincerely,



David Green
President, SEIU Local 721

c: Bob Schoonover, President, SEIU California