

Testimony to Nevada Legislative Committee on Health Care - August 4, 2004
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My name is Sandra Olguin. I am a registered nurse at Washoe Medical Center and a member of Operating Engineers Local 3.

The state's nursing shortage was recently explained to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* by Carolyn Yucha, dean at UNLV's School of Nursing. She said, "You pour them in the top and you lose them out the bottom." In other words, nurses are leaving the profession as fast as the university can train new ones.

I can see this happening in the unit where I work, Labor & Delivery. We have an ongoing staffing crisis in L&D because the nurses keep leaving. The situation is worse in August, typically our busiest month of the year.

At a recent unit meeting, management announced that they were unable to fill 37 12-hour shifts for the month of August. They said that if every nurse picks up a couple of extra shifts this month, we'll be able to fill all the gaps. And they asked for volunteers. Just two nurses out of the large meeting raised their hand.

It's not that we don't want to help. But we've already been pushed too hard for too long. Our normal full-time workweek is three shifts, 12 hours per shift. But our workload often keeps us longer than 12 hours; and some nurses have put in 4 or 5 shifts in a week. Picture yourself holding a patient's life in your hands after you've been working for 12 hours, with very little rest breaks, and your mind past exhaustion.

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We nurses left that meeting fearing that mandatory overtime was coming next. Washoe has never forced us to work overtime, has always relied on a voluntary policy. But we are worried that this will change, especially as we nurses get tired and stop volunteering.

I fear mandatory overtime because of the impact it will have on my nursing quality. Voluntary overtime puts patient safety at risk; but mandatory overtime is much worse because you take away the nurse's ability to judge her own condition and her readiness to give quality care.

Mandatory overtime will also affect my family. I have two beautiful daughters and a very supportive husband who I want to spend time with. My oldest daughter was home schooled last year and she required a lot of my time. When she was younger I was her Girl Scout leader. Both of my children are involved in sports. They count on me to be there for them. Am I supposed to sacrifice my obligation to my family because of mandatory overtime?

I know what will happen in L&D if mandatory overtime comes. More full-time nurses will choose to become part time or per diem. More nurses will call in sick due to stress and exhaustion. More nurses will transfer out of the unit, or leave nursing altogether.

I believe that our state is fully capable of recruiting and retaining enough nurses to safely staff its hospitals. It begins with the hospital industry valuing its staff and investing in them. You, as legislators, can help too--by passing laws that protect nurses and protect patients. One important step you can take, that many states have already done, is pass a law prohibiting mandatory overtime for healthcare workers. Thank you.