Sinai Grace Hospital workers are standing up and fighting for the changes they need to fix health disparities while demanding racial justice in their community.

Sinai Grace is home to hundreds of hospital workers like Respiratory Therapist Tracie Alexander. She lives close to the hospital and is deeply connected to the community.

“Where I live in Northwest Detroit, we are fighting to reduce health disparities and increase resources to a community that has been neglected and overlooked.”

Her statement underscores an important truth: in order to improve health outcomes, we must address the systemic racism which is the root cause of so many health disparities prevalent in the community.

After several meetings with her Union SEIU, Tracie and other leaders at Sinai Grace created a plan to survey community issues and connect with leaders and organizations that also may be tackling issues around health and racial justice. After the survey results are compiled, they will be presented to the community and elected leaders in the region.

“We all have the right to be heard and involved in decisions that impact our community and our quality of life. Democracy works best when everyone’s voice is heard,” says Alexander.
After nearly three years of the pandemic, nurses look for solutions to the industry-wide staffing crisis.

Laken Gray has been an ICU nurse at McLaren Bay for the last 13 years. She loves her job and the intensive care she is able to provide every day.

“I love being able to take care of critically sick patients and get them approved to the floor. And when we can’t achieve that right away, we keep patients and families comfortable as they receive care,” says Gray.

But nurses like Gray are being routinely pushed to the limit, picking up shifts and working long hours as they contend with a staffing crisis that hasn’t spared any hospital. As a result, providing quality patient care has become increasingly challenging. For patients in the ICU, that could mean the difference between checking and reducing a patient’s blood pressure in a timely manner.

“We are assigned two patients, sometimes up to three, which means patients don’t get one-on-one care. We try to give our patients the best care possible,” says Gray.

At Munson Cadillac, RN Bonnie Alworden has observed an influx of patients with mental health challenges in the ER due to a lack of community services. This system failure puts a strain on the healthcare staff already dealing with so many challenges. RNs have come to their Union for support in these tough times.

“Working together in our Union makes a huge difference. We have a lot of newer stewards, but we are making huge strides. It’s becoming more of a group effort,” says Gray.

“Though I was originally skeptical, I’ve been a Union steward for 30 years now. The stability of the Union contract makes a big difference. It provides stability and a voice, and when we use our voices we get heard,” says Alworden.

Across multiple hospitals, RNs are leading the way to create solutions and pushing for changes - in their workplaces and the industry as a whole.

At Munson Cadillac, retention bonuses have eased some of the staffing issues. The Union and the hospital negotiated a $5,000/year retention bonus for a 2-year commitment. It’s been a helpful stopgap, but Alworden says bigger solutions need to come from the state and federal level.

“Between 2023 and 2030, we will lose 25-50% of staff due to retirement because we are aging out and wearing out. Not enough new nurses are coming into the industry. We need to bring back federal programs that support nurses for choosing to work in rural areas that are struggling to recruit staff.”

Gray continues to advocate for patient-to-staff ratios and bringing back intern programs.

“We need intern and extern programs back, many got rid of them in the last 5-10 years. This can help with recruiting new nurses in the pipeline; 2 or 5 years down the road it could be helpful.”

Nurses will continue to lead the way in solving the staffing crisis and being a voice for change in their industry as a whole through their Union.
With some organizing and a little bit of grit, Ascension workers were able to secure an extra $500 in their pockets. Previously excluded from the award, Union members signed a petition demanding to be treated equally and won a decisive victory.

Last week, all full-time SEIU members who were eligible for the award received a $500 payment while part-time employees received $250. Their victory is a testament to the power of what workers can achieve when they use their voice to unite together for higher wages and better conditions on the job.

“Glad to be a part of our SEIU family. When we stick together, and with the full support of our Local, we get the awards and recognition that we deserve!”

Julie Watkins, Ascension Allegan Hospital

It’s no secret that there is a serious labor shortage in the healthcare industry.

The shortage cuts across all classifications for hospital workers - whether you’re cleaning a room or providing direct patient care. In order to bring a unified voice to tackle staffing shortages, stewards at Trinity Health have formed a roundtable to address issues head-on.

At Trinity Hospital in Muskegon, SEIU has wall-to-wall representation with over 1,800 workers in three bargaining units which includes service and support, techs, and RNs. This month concluded the elections for a new slate of steward leaders, and now these stewards will be charting the course for workers in their hospital.

At its first meeting, stewards created a plan to address the staffing crisis which has created challenges in every department. Stewards are planning a Halloween-themed event to show that short-staffing is spooky, kicking off an awareness campaign to bring changes to the hospital.
In October, Union workers at DMC Sinai Grace ratified a MOA to get retention bonuses for job classes that are short-staffed and continue to seek retention bonuses for all job classifications.

Larry Sanford, a new Union member, holds up a copy of the MOA. Union members who have signed their membership cards get a democratic vote in deciding Union business, such as ratifying retention bonus agreements.

“Union means coming together. Being as one. When we don’t do it - it doesn’t happen!”

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