

Oak Park Health Care Center employees stage protest

Workers claim company is ignoring care standards, disrespecting employees

Thursday, October 11th, 2012 5:07 PM

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Staff Reporters

A brief protest over low wages, patient treatment, quality care and short staffing erupted outside Oak Park Health Care Center, 625 N. Harlem Ave., on Wednesday afternoon.

Around 20 employees picketed outside the Oak Park facility for about 45 minutes, chanting, "We can pay, so can you!" while carrying signs reading "Residents and caregivers must come first" and "Invest in care now."



Oak Park Health Care was one of 50 nursing homes in the state targeted today by SEIU Healthcare, part of the Service Employees Union International. In addition to the Oak Park protest, some 2,000 union members simultaneously picketed nursing homes throughout Illinois, calling for better care for patients and higher wages for employees.

In a press release, SEIU Healthcare claimed that the nursing homes, whose owners are all members of the Illinois Association of Health Care Facilities, lacked adequate supplies and experienced high worker turnover. In addition, the union said, persistent short staffing has affected the quality of care the workers can deliver.

In February at Oak Park Health Care, 80-year-old Anibal Calderon died of a brain injury in a fall after another resident allegedly punched him in the face. Calderon and the 66-year-old man were both patients in the dementia ward, where a report from the state Department of Public Health said there should have been one nurse and two nursing aides.

The nurse present at the time said she didn't see anyone monitoring residents who were known to wander the unit, which Calderon was known to do. The other patient had a history of aggressive behavior and was previously involved in another altercation, but the report said his care plan did not note any methods to address that incident.

Mike Truppa, communications specialist for SEIU Healthcare, said the death of Calderon is one of the many reasons workers felt compelled to picket.

"It's emblematic of a larger problem, and that's why we're here," he said.

The press release detailed a 2010 law passed by Illinois lawmakers that sets better standards for quality care, specifically touching on staffing levels, but the union claims many of the health care centers have continually failed to meet standards.

Mike Bonamarte, an attorney with the Chicago law firm Levin & Perconti, which is representing Calderon's family in an ongoing lawsuit against Oak Park Health Care, said the protest did not surprise him. After the Calderon incident, he said the firm got a lot of calls from former employees who were disappointed with the way the facility was run.

"It's not surprising that people are now starting to speak out about the lack of resources available to the staff that's actually there," he said. "When there's an insufficient number of appropriately trained, supervised staff, the logical result is that the patient care suffers," even though the employees do care

about their jobs.

The union claims the owners of the 50 nursing homes made a combined profit of \$50 million last year, and are asking that some of that money be invested into wages. The union has been in contract negotiations with the company since January but on Wednesday, workers said enough is enough.

"Our patients deserve adequate care. The best care that we can give," said Lillie Hodges, a 32-year certified nursing assistant at Oak Park Health Care. "So in order to do the best care we can, we need staffing and need a raise, because we're overworked and underpaid.

"The patients we have need more help than we have. They're being neglected. And not by us — by the owners. ... We're asking to be treated with dignity and respect. And that's a lot that we're not getting."