Nurses Announce Legislation to Prohibit Forced Overtime

MADISON, Wis. – Legislation to ban mandatory overtime for Wisconsin nurses and healthcare workers was announced today at a press conference at the Capitol. Mandatory overtime is unsafe for patients and is driving nurses out of the profession, further worsening the nursing shortage.

Senator Judy Robson and Representative Sandy Pasch, both registered nurses, are the lead sponsors of the bill.

Hospitals regularly use mandatory overtime to fill shifts. Nurses are forced, often with short notice, to work beyond the end of their shift, sometimes up to 16 hours in a row. Fatigued nurses are more likely to make mistakes which put patients at risk.

Candice Owley, president of the Wisconsin Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, says, "Mandatory overtime is risky business. Hospitals who force fatigued nurses to make life and death decisions are jeopardizing patient care. This legislation will make healthcare safer for Wisconsin patients."

The legislation would limit forced overtime to, only in cases of unforeseen emergencies, such as debilitating snow storms, epidemics or terrorist attacks.

A 2008 survey by the Wisconsin Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals of Wisconsin nurses found that mandatory overtime is widespread and is a major contributor to errors in patient care:

- 42% of the nurses said they have been forced to work mandatory overtime at least once a month with 12% mandated at least once a week.
- 82% of the nurses believe that mandatory overtime is an important contributor to nurse turnover, with 54% saying it is a very important contributor.
- 73% of the nurses believe a ban on mandatory overtime would significantly improve the ability to recruit new nurses into the profession.
- When asked to what extent quality of care suffered when nurses are required to work forced overtime, 96% said quality suffers, with 56% saying it suffers a great deal.
- Evidence of care suffering was born out with 43% of the nurses reporting they were aware of errors in care that have occurred as a result of nurse fatigue. Over 500 nurses listed examples of errors. The overwhelming number of examples centered on medication errors. The errors reported by the nurses included giving the wrong medication, the wrong dosages, administering drugs at the wrong time and to the wrong patients. The other concerns cited were examples of nurses falling asleep at work or while driving home.

(The Wisconsin Federation of Nurses & Health Professionals, "RN Opinion Survey," May, 2008)
Kristie Koney, a nurse at St. Francis Hospital in Milwaukee, says it’s time to put an end to mandatory overtime, “When I am mandated to work overtime, I put my license on the line. My patients, all patients, deserve better.” She went on to say, forced overtime puts a great deal of stress on her family, “When I am told I can’t go home at the end of my shift, I have to figure out who is going to take care of my kids. It’s really stressful.”

Karen Woods, R.N., left critical care nursing because of mandatory overtime. “While I was working, I was frequently forced to work mandatory overtime. I couldn’t say no because I could lose my job, but I didn’t feel safe making critical decisions for my patients when I was so tired. Finally, I left critical care— I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

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Wisconsin FNHP is a division of AFT Healthcare, which represents more than 65,000 nurses and other healthcare professionals.

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