

Barton Health nurses fed up; vote for union

By Kathryn Reed

Nurses from Barton Memorial Hospital and Lake Tahoe Surgery Center have voted to join the California Nurses Association.

The vote this week marks the first time for any group within the South Shore-based health conglomerate to unionize. In a secret ballot conducted by the National Labor Relations Board on Nov. 15 the vote was 123-17 to join CNA. Barton employs 205 registered nurses, with about three-quarters of them working for one of the two entities that elected to join the union.

When the hospital opened 54 years ago this month there were 20 employees besides the 18 physicians and five dentists.

Nurses and other workers throughout the health care system have been disgruntled with their employer for some time, citing work conditions, training and issues with upper management.



Barton Health nurses celebrate joining the California Nurses Association. Photo/Provided

Nurses only had contact with their immediate boss and the nursing director – not upper management. Their concerns were not addressed to their liking, so they opted in late October to call for the vote to unionize.

“I think for every department it was a little bit different issue. But the basic issue was how our problems in each department affected patient care,” Ulla Reinitzer, a registered nurse with Barton for 12 years, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The health organization has multiple departments where nurses work, not all are in the hospital. They include labor and delivery, like where Reinitzer works, ICU, emergency room, hospice, clinics and many others.

Reinitzer said the big thing for her department is the staffing shortage. Three of the nurses working nights – which represents half the staff – are traveling nurses who are hired on a short-term basis.

She said there has been an undercurrent of problems at the hospital for years, but recently it’s gotten worse.

Jennifer Lemmon with the California Nurses Association told *Lake Tahoe News*, “At the end of the day what the nurses are most concerned about is having all the tools they need to provide high quality patient care, appropriate staffing, meals and breaks so have rest periods because that also impacts patient care.”

She added that they are also concerned about training. Nurses often are told to work in a unit outside of their specialty and don’t always have the training to do so, according to Lemmon.

The next step is for the nurses to elect board members and designate a negotiating team. From there, a contract between the nurses and Barton will be created.

“Barton Health respects the nurses’ decision and right to join a union. We remain committed to providing high-quality, compassionate care together,” CEO Clint Purvance told *Lake Tahoe News*.

What he didn’t answer is: What will this mean for the hospital? Why did the administration oppose the nurses joining the union?

Wages and other benefits will be other items for the two sides to come to agreement on.

California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee/AFL-CIO first started in 1903 and now represents nurses in every state.