

3/7/2023

Senator Wiklund, Chair
Health and Human Services Committee
Minnesota Senate Building

Dear Chair Wiklund and committee members,

I have been a nurse for 44 years, 24 of them at Abbott Northwestern. I work on the Child/Adolescent mental health unit at Abbott Northwestern Hospital. I have actually loved nursing through the challenges of evolving health care and increasingly complex care in the hospital systems in the last 43 44 years. I value the time I get to spend with patients and families teaching them the strategies they will need to weather their medical or mental health care crisis.

The hospitals and hospital lobby are likely to say that we cannot legislate staffing ratios because it is financially unsustainable. However, there already are staffing ratios in place created by hospitals, to which there is inconsistent adherence.

In the spring of 2021 Abbott Northwestern Hospital, a part of Allina Health, decided to change the staffing ratios across the four mental health units so that individual nurses had a not only the responsibility for the care of a greater number of patients, but also had to assume some of the responsibilities of our support staff. On child/adolescent mental health unit, it meant more responsibilities and fewer nurses to support and to teach the children strategies to manage anxiety and depression while managing their emotions in real time. It has also meant fewer nurses to maintain safety for patients and staff during behavioral crises.

Over the course of the last approximately three years we have been admitting more young people with complex mental health needs, requiring longer hospitalizations. They are kids for whom placement is difficult because of substance abuse disorders, violent behavior or chronic difficulty functioning at home, school or in the community. This new mixture of acute and chronically ill children and adolescents on our mental health unit has created a new, dangerous, and often volatile mix of patients.

From February through December 2021 there were 33 assaults of nurses and support staff on the 4 mental health care units. Nine of these nurse injuries were severe enough to require staff to take extended medical leave to recover from their injuries. Five of these nurses continue to experience serious and lingering effects from their assaults.

Despite this trend of assaults and injuries, there have been no changes in the staffing patterns that would support staff in maintaining greater safety.

This is unconscionable.

If one pays attention to patterns of behavior as a predictor of future behavior, hospital executives and administrators are unlikely to respond to these stories in a meaningful way. In the 43 44 years I have been a nurse, I have not observed a pattern in which resources were increased to help staff manage increasing acuity of the patients over the course of time.

We need your support as you or a loved one will undoubtedly need our support someday. We need adequate staffing, increased safety, violence prevention. These are the elements that will draw nurses back to the bedside to care for our communities.

Thank you,

Sue Schroeder