



JNESO

DISTRICT COUNCIL 1, IUOE / AFL-CIO
the professional health care union

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For Immediate Release

Nurses Suffer from Lack of PPE

North Brunswick, N.J. (April 6, 2020) -- Things are bad and getting worse for nurses and hospital techs, despite reports that more personal protective equipment is being funneled to New Jersey healthcare facilities.

“Nurses are scared and angry because they aren’t getting the PPE they need to do their jobs. They are doing whatever they can to stay safe and in some cases they are being unfairly punished for it. Others have given up and left the profession,” said Douglas Placa, Executive Director of JNESO District Council 1, a union that serves 5,000 health care professionals in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. “The changing CDC guidelines seem to only address supplies as opposed to focusing on safety and what is really needed to keep nurses from getting sick, and the result is putting health care workers at increased risk for exposure.”

A nurse in South Jersey brought her own N95 mask and gloves to work. She was told to go home when she refused to follow a supervisor’s order to remove the N95 mask and only wear the thin white surgical mask the facility provided. She was also prevented from wearing gloves at her nursing station, which she brought from home to protect against exposure in the common nursing area.

“I was told I had to take off the N95 mask and that I can’t wear it at all, unless I was going into a COVID positive patient room. We are unsure who may have the virus because people are often asymptomatic,” said nurse Dawn Kulach. “The hospital thinks they are protecting us by giving us surgical masks to wear, but they gave me the thinnest tissue paper mask, not like the N95 that can protect you better and the thin mask is supposed to last the whole day. I don’t feel safe not wearing my personal N95, which was brand new. I have a right to protect myself and my patients.”

Several nurses in a North Jersey hospital have taken to wearing garbage bags over their thin plastic gowns because they are only given 1 gown per 12-hour shift. They also get one N95 mask for the day. One ICU nurse has resorted to wearing a Tyvek painting outfit, goggles, a hair cover and a full construction contractor’s respirator just to keep herself safe.

“I keep it on all the time. I have three young children who are medically vulnerable, so I need to protect myself to fullest,” said nurse Pam Tavarone. “The gowns easily rip, they aren’t made to be worn more than once, so using them over and over can leave us unprotected. The N95 masks we have now are very flimsy and don’t fit very well. Masks are supposed to be tight and you shouldn’t be able to smell or taste anything if they fit correctly. Many of the nurses are putting surgical masks over them to tie them tight enough around their faces.”



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A southern New Jersey rehabilitation center, which has a very vulnerable population of elderly patients and those in recovery, only gives nurses one surgical mask to use for an entire week and there are no provisions for disinfecting them.

“When we get sick, who is going to take care of all these patients?” said Tavarone.

“This is not about me, it is about the entire hospital and putting us at risk. How can I advocate for my patients if I can’t advocate for myself and my co-workers,” said Kulach. “I can always find another job, but you can’t give someone back their life.”

JNESO and other unions have been working closely with the governor’s office to address the PPE issue, and have had frequent calls with employers, but communication to the front-line staff is often misrepresented if shared at all.

“More needs to be done on the federal level, but for now JNESO will challenge any hospital that is found to have supplies and fails to distribute what is needed to our nurses and techs,” said Placa.

“But this goes beyond PPE and includes a fair way to handle quarantines and sick leave, ensuring breaks during increasingly longer shifts, and access to services like counseling so they can stay physically and emotionally healthy and continue to do their job -- taking care of patients,” emphasized Placa.

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