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Comments of Jerri Strasser, RN
Before the Assembly Committee on Health and Human
Services
February 10, 2003

Hello, my name is Jerri Strasser. I'm a Registered Nurse and a member of the SEIU Local 1107's Nurse Alliance. Our Nurse Alliance represents more than 3,000 bedside nurses. We're the largest organization of nurses in Nevada.

Today, you are addressing the most important issue facing our healthcare system – the availability of Registered Nurses in Nevada.

Too often we hear the same thing – there is a shortage of nurses and we need to find more of them. We are here to tell you today that the nurses are out there - we just have to do a better job retaining them.

About this time last year, the SEIU Nurse Alliance went directly to the source and conducted a survey of nurses who have left local hospitals. Our goals were to determine how many nurses are licensed, but not working in hospitals or not practicing nursing at all, and to discover what factors are driving nurses away from hospitals and their profession.

We found that 45% of nurses surveyed chose to either leave nursing or not to work in a hospital. Nearly three-fourths of these nurses cited working conditions as a reason for leaving. Staffing and mandatory overtime were the two most common working conditions mentioned. These registered nurses opted for employment with insurance companies, doctors' offices, surgical centers, schools, nursing homes and home healthcare settings.

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SUBMITTED BY: Jerri Strasser, R.N.

Figures provided by the Nevada Hospital Association and the Nursing Board last year, support these findings. In 2001, there approximately 700 more licensed nurses than vacant nursing positions. But yet we still have a problem.

According to an overwhelming majority of Registered Nurses, improved staffing and more flexible shifts are needed in order to recruit and keep nurses. The common theme throughout the survey is nurses want to provide patients with the best care possible, but staffing levels and long hours make it difficult.

The crisis will not be solved by recruitment and education initiatives or by multi-state licensure. Recruitment initiatives may introduce new nurses to the profession, but as our study shows, without improving working conditions, nurses will not stay at the bedside.

Multi-state licensure is an even worse solution. It would allow nurses to be permanent residents of another state and work in Nevada hospitals. It would disenfranchise Nevada nurses and drive them away from our profession. These nurses would become "permanent travelers" with no ties to the community they served. It would undermine the patient care standards we have worked hard to protect and uphold while doing nothing to improve the working conditions that are driving nurses away.

I've been a nurse for more than 20 years. The only true solutions are to mandate safe staffing standards and to place limits on mandatory overtime. As long as nurses are overloaded and unable to provide quality care for patients, nurses will continue to face high levels of frustration, stress, and injuries – and look elsewhere for careers that provide greater rewards and satisfaction. There are experienced nurses available. We just need to bring them back to our hospitals.