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Residents and fellows training at Northwestern Medicine file to unionize

By Ilana Arougheti
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The Northwestern Medicine Lavin Family Pavilion in Chicago on Aug. 23, 2023. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

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Residents and fellows training at Northwestern Medicine hospitals and clinics announced Friday that they will seek to unionize. The group, encompassing nearly 1,300 trainees, filed with the National Labor Relations Board late Friday morning.

If successful, the residents and fellows will work with the Committee of Interns and Residents. Residents and fellows placed at Northwestern Medicine facilities are all trainees at the McGaw Medical Center at Northwestern University.

More than 65% of the McGaw student body voted to file union cards Friday. CIR represents more than 30,000 residents and fellows. Members work in hospitals in 11 states, including Illinois.

“We have a lot to offer in terms of our views of what would be beneficial, what would make a difference for patients, what would take their care to the next level,” organizer Dr. Joseph deBettencourt, a third-year pediatric resident at Lurie Children’s Hospital, told the Chicago Tribune.

The McGaw Medical Center at Northwestern University is currently reviewing the petition to unionize and plans to “respond in due course,” a spokesperson said. Northwestern Medicine was not available for comment.

Though most residents have already signed salary agreements, members are hoping that unionizing will allow them to agitate for better cost-of-living adjustments in the future, deBettencourt said. Some members also want pay adjustments for housing, as long and unpredictable hours force most to sign leases in the expensive Streeterville neighborhood.

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"We've seen other programs around us, especially ones that have unions, have better support for child care and for housing," deBettencourt said.

Residents and fellows training at Northwestern hospitals often work upward of 80 hours a week, CIR said Friday. deBettencourt said residents are often asked to work 24-hour shifts, and hope to negotiate for fewer of these shifts to be required.

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Residents and fellows function as front-line workers, deBettencourt said, and hope a union would improve standards of patient care. They're often the first people patients encounter when admitted to a hospital.

"To be so hands-on in that way and have really limited control over how the hospital distributes its resources, and even how we set our schedules and go about our lives, it can be disempowering," Dr. Mugdha Mokashi, a second year OB/GYN resident, said.

The cohort is especially focused on creating more programming for patients of color in working-class communities, CIR said Friday. If recognized, the union plans to advocate for more in-person translators across Northwestern University hospitals, deBettencourt said. Many patients still rely on digital or video translators. Some opt to describe medical issues to doctors in limited English, afraid their native language will be mistranslated, deBettencourt said.

"Being able to say, 'Hey, I'm in my outpatient clinic, I'm in my hospital, it's the middle of the night, but I have access to these resources equally across our locations,'" deBettencourt said, "It's a big ask but it's something that we see every day as residents."

Mokashi also wants residents to have more control over how funding is allocated to patients. As an obstetrics and gynecology resident, she says the volume of patients seeking family planning has "exploded," and wants more of a say in what resources the hospital can provide.

Some residents have similar hopes around funding for migrants who visit Northwestern hospitals, Mokashi said.

The group has been preparing for nearly two years ahead of Friday's filing to unionize. They sought advice from colleagues at Stanford University and the University of Illinois at Chicago, where 842 residents, fellows and interns formed a union in 2021.

Northwestern Medicine operates 10 hospitals and upward of 200 outpatient

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facilities across the Chicago area. The university health care system netted \$2.3 billion in patient revenue this year.

While residents are calling on Northwestern Medicine and the McGaw Medical Center to voluntarily recognize their union, they expect to go to a vote among all employees, deBettencourt said.

Some doctors across the hospitals McGaw students work at were unionized during their own residencies, which deBettencourt hopes will lead to support during a vote. Administrators at Lurie have also been particularly supportive, he said.

“I know they’re always happy to hear from us and encourage us to be advocating for what we want,” deBettencourt said. “For a lot of the programs that have unions, when (medical students) interview ... they use it as a selling point for their program.”

The university hospital system is no stranger to union activity, with 1,200 workers at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in a separate union under SEIU. Residents and interns at Northwestern Memorial also [formed](#) a labor group in 2000, following national rulings allowing residents and interns at hospitals to unionize.

The group now operates as the McGaw Housestaff Association, which is not a formal union but has its own constitution and bylaws. Members meet with the Graduate Medical Education Committee six to eight times a year to raise issues and questions on behalf of all McGaw educational programs.

Mokashi feels the call to unionize has formed a sense of unity across specialties at Northwestern Medicine — more so than any programming offered by McGaw, she said.

“Part of us being able to advocate for patients is us being able to advocate for ourselves as a group,” Mokashi said. “The desire to unionize ... comes out of a place of love for this institution, love for each other and a hope we can do better for each other, rather than from a place of criticism or cynicism.”

Health care unions have maintained a strong presence in Chicago this year, following a summer of labor strikes.

Union employees at Howard Brown Health clinics, Loretto Hospital in Austin and

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