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# Joliet nurses begin 4-day strike for increased staffing, higher pay

By Ilana Arougheti

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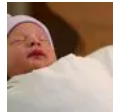
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Nurses cross Madison Street following a news conference outside Ascension St. Joseph hospital in Joliet as the Illinois Nurses Association begins a four-day strike on Aug. 22, 2023. (Trent Sprague/Chicago Tribune)

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Five hundred and thirty nurses at Ascension St. Joseph hospital in Joliet went on strike Tuesday morning as contract negotiations between union nurses and Ascension remain stalled.

The strikers, who are represented by the Illinois Nurses Association, are seeking increased staffing and higher wages.

The union has been negotiating for a new contract since May. Ascension canceled a bargaining session on Aug. 15, the day after the strike was announced. Ascension representatives have said they will not come back to the bargaining table until Sept. 8.

The picket line opened at 6:30 a.m. Tuesday. Nurses, union representatives and supporters will continue to picket daily from 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. through Friday.




Strikers held signs encouraging passing cars to “honk if you love nurses.” Some roared past the hospital’s Madison Street entrance on motorcycles.

Ascension St. Joseph is the only major hospital in Joliet. When residents of the area are in critical condition, nurses are often on the front lines of emergency care, said St. Joseph nurse Pat Meade.

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Nurse Rebekah Piunti, of Joliet, drums on a bucket as the Illinois Nurses Association begins a four-day strike at Ascension St. Joseph hospital in Joliet on Aug. 22, 2023. (Trent Sprague/Chicago Tribune)

Nurses are the ones who call “code blues” to start lifesaving treatment when patients experience heart failure, among many other daily tasks, said Meade, who has worked at St. Joseph for 35 years.

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“We need Ascension to recognize who cares for their patients,” Meade said at Tuesday’s strike.

Ascension called the strike “disheartening” in a statement to the Chicago Tribune. The hospital will remain open during the duration of the strike, and Ascension said the hospital is following what it considers to be national best practices in the meantime.

“Notwithstanding this disheartening strike, we will continue to negotiate in good faith to come to a mutually beneficial agreement on an initial contract that respects the human dignity and rights of all,” Ascension said in the statement.

Joliet Mayor Terry D’Arcy was present at the strike Tuesday. At a Joliet City Council meeting last week, D’Arcy criticized Ascension for bringing “an economic agenda” to hospital operations, and for refusing to come to the bargaining table in the days leading up to the strike.

“They’ve given their lives to our community,” D’Arcy said of striking nurses.

During contract negotiations, nurses have felt insulted by Ascension proposals to offer higher raises to newer nurses than older nurses, nurse Jeanine Johnson told the Tribune last week. Early versions proposed by Ascension excluded years spent working in other countries from a nurse’s work history when considering wages.

At the council meeting, D’Arcy said that the city reached out to Ascension during the negotiation process, to little effect.

The strike was initially set for two days. Plans for a four-day picket line arose after Ascension announced last week that union nurses would be locked out of St. Joseph for four days.

[\[ Ascension St. Joseph Hospital in Joliet to lock out nurses who threatened to strike as union negotiations continue \]](#)

Nurses gathering on Tuesday’s picket line were joined by several sneering

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iterations of Scabby the Rat. The 12-foot-tall inflatable rodent has become an iconic guest at union protests, particularly when nonunion contractors are used to temporarily replace strikers.

Union representatives speaking to the Joliet City Council estimated that each of the nonunion nurses brought in during the strike would be paid at least \$7,000, plus meals, transportation and lodging.

“I don’t get \$7,000 for even a month,” Vera Appiah-Dankwah, who has worked as a nurse at St. Joseph for 12 years, told the council.

“Reimbursing us for what we are doing is not in the picture at all.”

Ascension, a Catholic nonprofit health care network, operates 2,600 health care sites, including 142 hospitals, across the country.

About 800 nurses were on staff at St. Joseph when Ascension acquired the hospital in 2018. Nearly 350 nurses have since left, 120 of whom worked in the intensive care unit, according to the union.

Some area hospitals offer upward of \$15 an hour more than Ascension St. Joseph currently pays nurses, according to the union.

Jamie Brown, a nurse at Ascension Borgess Hospital in Kalamazoo, Michigan, told strikers that nurses at Ascension hospitals in Michigan have faced similar treatment and response from Ascension.

“When the nurses are outside, there’s a problem inside,” Brown said, echoing a strike chant. “Ascension nurses stand together.”

*[ [How a sprawling hospital chain ignited its own staffing crisis](#) ]*

Nurses allege that several floors of the hospital are understaffed, with high patient-to-nurse ratios that present danger for the most critical cases. The surgery and telemetry floors, as well as the labor and delivery floor are particularly overwhelmed.

The intensive care unit at St. Joseph has reduced its number of beds by half in recent years, and nurses have still been asked to triple up at times,

ICU nurse Jeanine Johnson told the Tribune last week.

The first time that Ascension was responsible for renewing its contract with St. Joseph nurses, in 2020, negotiations took five months, culminating [in a 16-day strike](#). St. Joseph nurses won their [first-ever contract](#) in 1993 after a 61-day strike.

Many union nurses at St. Joseph work alongside their parents, siblings and children on staff, Meade said. Meade's own mother was one of the first Black nurses at St. Joseph and helped shape protocol in the hospital's labor and delivery unit.

"We're taking care of each other on a family level," Meade said. "This is not just a job, this is a profession that we're proud of."

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