

Protesters rally about working conditions at state hospital

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HUNTINGTON – Protesters rallied Monday against what they described as unsafe working conditions, increasing violence and mandatory overtime affecting their fellow union members at Mildred-Mitchell Bateman Hospital.

The midday event attracted a small number of demonstrators at the hospital's main entrance, located along Norway Avenue in Huntington. Few, if any, of the protesters were employees of the state-run psychiatric hospital.

Health services worker Jerry Singleton spoke to the demonstrators and then watched with colleagues from across the hospital's driveway. He said working conditions are safe and that many appreciate the extra money, although they frown upon overtime being mandatory.

"I think we ought to have a choice," he said. "If we don't, we get written up for it."

Monday's event was organized by the state's Public Workers Union, also known as United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America Local 170. It represents 56 people at Mildred-Mitchell Bateman, according to the union's state hospital president Shelia Nestor.

She and international union representative John Thompson said inadequate staffing has forced too many their members into long shifts. For example, they said it's not unusual for a worker to pull two 16-hour shifts with only 8 hours of down time in between. That leaves little room for food, family and sleep.

"Folks are having to work unlimited amounts of overtime, which are causing unhealthy, very stressful working conditions," Thompson said.

Mildred-Mitchell Bateman housekeeper Tammy Fankell also congregated with the protesters and watched across the driveway. She said health service workers take the brunt of the forced overtime.

"They tell them they're tired, and they make them work anyway," she said. "We're understaffed bad."

John Law, spokesman for the state Department of Health and Human Resources, said mandatory



Curtis Johnson / The Herald-Dispatch
Demonstrators rally Monday, Jan. 16, 2012, at Mildred-Mitchell Bateman Hospital in Huntington.

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overtime is used as a last resort. He was unsure as to the frequency at which Mildred-Mitchell Bateman reached that threshold; however, he said state hospitals have continual staffing problems.

Nestor attributed her union's concern about increasing violence at Mildred-Mitchell Bateman to the forensic and psychiatric nature of the patients it treats. She said workers are not afforded proper training.

Singleton said he hadn't seen an increased level of violence.

Law said the recent death of a Mildred-Mitchell Bateman patient remains under investigation. He was unsure as to the status of two employees, both of whom were suspended following the patient's death.

Union representatives were joined Monday by members of Occupy Huntington, a group that used an encampment to demonstrate for eight consecutive weeks at Fifth Avenue and 10th Street. Former occupier Nic Eaton, of Charleston, said the rally wasn't an official Occupy event, but instead a gathering that shared its principles and beliefs.