

January 16, 2012

0

Recommend

Tweet 2

## Union pickets protest conditions at Bateman Hospital

By [Lori Kersey](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- In an effort to draw attention to problems at the state's psychiatric hospitals, members of the West Virginia Public Workers Union UE Local 170 rallied Monday outside Mildred Mitchell-Bateman Hospital in Huntington.

The informational picket was to show hospital employees and patients that the union supports them, field organizer John Thompson said.

"We just wanted to be out here today to let them know that we're working for them to have better working conditions and for the residents that they serve," Thompson said.

The picketing coincided with the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, Thompson pointed out. King was killed in Memphis, Tenn., in 1968 while he was there to support striking sanitation workers.

About two dozen community members and union members showed up, Thompson said. Some held signs calling for a stop to mandatory overtime, he said.

Bateman Hospital and William R. Sharpe Jr. Hospital in Weston have been under court monitoring for decades, Thompson said. Employees have complained about bad working conditions and over-bedding at both facilities.

A September 2010 report from the Office of the Court Monitor of West Virginia's Thirteenth Judicial Circuit noted that the hospital is overcapacity for patients and that over-bedding has been a problem for about five years. The report also noted that employees said they are not adequately trained for handling forensic patients and that employees are frustrated by a practice of mandatory overtime.

John Law, spokesman for the state Department of Health and Human Resources, which oversees the facilities, said mandatory overtime is used only as a last resort. He said working conditions for employees is something that can always be improved.

"I think it always needs working on and can always improve," Law said. People are sent to the hospitals against their will, many at traumatic times in their lives, he said.

"We always have to look at patient safety and worker safety."

Late last year at Bateman Hospital, a forensic patient died after an altercation with hospital employees. Officials at the West Virginia State Police are investigating. No charges have been filed.

Thompson said he didn't know the circumstances of the death, but given the incident, the union wanted to let employees and patients know that members are there for them "and we're trying to draw attention to ongoing problems."

Reach [Lori Kersey](#) at [lori.ker...@wvgazette.com](mailto:lori.ker...@wvgazette.com) or 304-348-1240.

---