

Nurses vote to join union

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Workers cheer late-night tally of 672-345

By Cadence Mertz

Registered nurses at Vermont's largest hospital voted nearly 2-to-1 in favor of forming a union.

The final count, 672-345, was announced around 11:15 p.m. Thursday at Fletcher Allen Health Care's offices on the Trinity College campus in Burlington. Nurses erupted with cheers, hugs and tears. Fists pumped in the air. Nurses and union organizers high-fived each other.

Rosemary Cross, a registered nurse who has been at Fletcher Allen 30 years, clasped her palms to her cheeks, alternating between gasps and grins.

"Oh, my God!" she said, jumping up and down as friends came to hug her.

One woman held her cell phone over her head so the nurses working in the neo-natal intensive care unit could hear the cheers. Someone passed out salmon-colored roses.

The nurses will become members of the Vermont Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, under the auspices of the American Federation of Teachers. Nearly 1,120 registered nurses were eligible to vote. The voting took place over two days, finishing at 8 p.m. Thursday. It was the second union effort in four years. A 1998 attempt failed.

Fletcher Allen management quietly accepted the results of the vote. The establishment of a union is the latest in a series of blows to hospital management, which state and federal prosecutors are investigating following allegations of wrongdoing. Management opposed the union.

Acting Chief Executive Officer Thad Krupka said Thursday he was "really not" surprised and felt good about the outcome and moving forward.

"Tonight the democratic process worked once again," Krupka said. "I think we've known for many months that there are some deep-seated problems."

The next step for both sides is negotiating a contract. Hospital management will work to put together a negotiating team. Krupka said the hospital will attempt to balance the needs and wants of the nurses with those of patients.

The nurses must select representatives to participate in the bargaining process, said registered nurse Tara Risinger, who worked for the union. The first union meeting is Wednesday, Risinger said.

The pro-union campaign centered on allegations of poor nurse-to-patient ratios and the hospital's unwillingness to do enough to attract and retain nurses.

Pro-union nurses said the medical care at the Burlington hospital suffers from short-staffing and high nurse turnover due to low pay and a negative working environment. Fletcher Allen management has not done enough to attract new nurses and retain existing staff, nurses said.

Krupka said the hospital must factor in the limitations caused by a national nursing shortage and rapidly growing patient load when management approaches the bargaining table in coming months.

The union effort that culminated Thursday was the fifth at the hospital in the last 25 years.

This union drive was better organized than that of four years ago, said Philip Fiermonte, executive director of United Professions of Vermont, the Vermont affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers.

Nurses publicly announced the union drive in June, Risinger said. The campaign was marked by posturing on both sides.

The hospital hired Kentucky-based Adams, Nash, Haskell & Sheridan to relay hospital management's viewpoint of the union. Union negotiators would create a gulf between management and staff, and a contract would eliminate flexibility, according to hospital management.

Union organizers countered with fliers, videos, and telephone calls to nurses to inform them of the benefits of unionizing. Organizers, including Risinger, met with more than 700 Fletcher Allen nurses to detail what the union could do. Nurses will have a seat at the bargaining table and a voice in how patient care is determined, Risinger said.

The union movement received widespread support from Vermont's religious leaders and state and local officials. Politicians and religious leaders asked hospital management not to spend health care money fighting the union effort. Gov. Howard Dean said in mid-September he would vote for the union if he were a registered nurse at Fletcher Allen. That kind of high profile support was a significant boost to the nurses, registered nurse Maura Malone said.

Malone said the problems that drove nurses to vote in favor of organizing had been festering since the failed union drive in 1998.

"We did it," registered nurse Mary Flemming said Thursday night. "Finally."

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BOX: Vermont unions

The registered nurses at Fletcher Allen will become members of the Vermont Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, which falls under the national American Federation of Teachers. Locally, the AFT oversees the nurses union and United Professions of Vermont. Here is a list of the Vermont members:

A Brattleboro Memorial Hospital registered nurses, VFNHP

A Brattleboro Memorial Hospital licensed practical nurses, VFNHP

A University of Vermont faculty, UPV

A Mill River High School teachers, UPV

A Vermont state colleges faculty, UPV

A Vermont state colleges professional staff, UPV

NEWS; Pg. 1A

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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