

Kaiser's 2,600 mental health workers strike in California

January 12 2015, by Olga R. Rodriguez



Kaiser Permanente mental health professionals rally outside the Kaiser Permanente West Los Angeles Medical Center in Los Angeles Monday, Jan. 12, 2015. The health care provider's 2,600 psychologists, therapists and social workers walked out Monday throughout California to demand that Kaiser Permanente offer timely, quality mental health care at its psychiatry departments and clinics, said Jim Clifford, a union member and San Diego psychiatric therapist. The walkout will affect all 86 Kaiser Permanente hospitals and clinics. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

Hundreds of Kaiser Permanente mental health professionals throughout California kicked off a weeklong strike Monday to protest what they say is a lack of staffing that affects care.

The health care provider's 2,600 psychologists, therapists and social workers walked out to demand that Kaiser Permanente offer timely, quality mental health care at its psychiatry departments and clinics, said Jim Clifford, a union member and San Diego psychiatric therapist.

Clifford said some patients have to wait up to two months for follow-up appointments, which prolongs the recovery process.

"Kaiser purports to be the leader in health care, but it's continuing the history of discrimination against the mentally ill, and that's unacceptable to us," said Clifford, who has been with Kaiser for 13 years.

The mental health workers are represented by the National Union of Healthcare Workers, which has been unable to reach a contract agreement with Kaiser since the union formed five years ago.

John Nelson, Kaiser's vice president of government relations, denied there is a shortage of mental health staff. He said the health plan has increased staffing statewide by 25 percent in the past three years, while membership grew by 8 percent during the same period.

He said the false claims are part of the union's bargaining tactic.

"They think that attacking Kaiser Permanente's reputation will get them a better contract," Nelson said. "It's frustrating, it's disappointing, but it's their strategy."



Kaiser Permanente mental health professionals and family members rally outside the Kaiser Permanente West Los Angeles Medical Center in Los Angeles Monday, Jan. 12, 2015. The health care provider's 2,600 psychologists, therapists and social workers walked out Monday throughout California to demand that Kaiser Permanente offer timely, quality mental health care at its psychiatry departments and clinics, said Jim Clifford, a union member and San Diego psychiatric therapist. The walkout will affect all 86 Kaiser Permanente hospitals and clinics. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

He said that appointments are being rescheduled and that during the strike, psychiatrists on staff will treat patients in crisis or with an emergency.

Meanwhile, more than 18,000 Kaiser nurses and nurse practitioners in Northern and central California are planning to strike Jan. 21-22.

The nurses say Kaiser has cut hospital services, restricted admission of patients and has discharged patients who still need care, The Oakland Tribune reported (bit.ly/1y4C8xw).



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The workers, who are part of the California Nurses Association/National Nurses Association, are striking to protest what they call "a growing

erosion of patient care standards," according to a news release.

Nurses held a two-day strike in November. The union and Kaiser are in contract talks, and the health provider has said it's hopeful about reaching a fair agreement.

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