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Health Care

Kaiser Permanente midwives, nurse anesthetists strike over staffing and pay concerns



Kaiser's Roseville Medical Center is on Eureka Road.

SONYA SORICH | SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

By Chris Campbell - Reporter, Sacramento Business Journal
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Story Highlights

- Kaiser Permanente midwives and nurse anesthetists staged one-day strike.
- Union claims unsafe staffing levels and cites proposed benefit cuts.
- Kaiser disputes claims, says staffing meets state standards.

Hundreds of Kaiser Permanente midwives and nurse anesthetists staged a one day strike across Northern California on Monday, claiming unsafe staffing levels and citing burnout and proposed cuts to pay and benefits.

The United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals, which represents 40,000 members statewide, organized the strike for more than 600 certified nurse midwives and certified registered nurse anesthetists at over 20 hospitals. Picket lines were concentrated at Kaiser Permanente's Roseville and Oakland medical centers.

Union leaders said the action, their first in an ongoing contract negotiation with Kaiser executives, was intended to spotlight gaps in staffing and the risks they pose to patient care.

"Midwives and certified registered nurse anesthetists are trusted at every critical juncture, guiding families through birth, easing patients through surgery, and stepping in at life's most vulnerable moments," said Charmaine S. Morales, president of UNAC/UHCP, in a news release.

UNAC/UHCP Executive Director Joe Guzynski said Sacramento-area teams have been stretched thin as staff leave for competitors.

"For midwives, that means patients lose access to the kind of high-touch, family-centered care that makes midwifery so effective. For certified nurse anesthetists, losing experienced CRNAs disrupts continuity of care, strains teams, and forces patients to face longer wait times for procedures," Guzynski said.

Kaiser Permanente disputed that its staffing practices endanger patients. Lionel Sims, senior vice president of human resources for Kaiser Permanente Northern California, said the organization's staffing levels "meet, and in many cases exceed, the nurse-to-patient ratios and workforce standards mandated by the State of California."

He added that in 2024, Kaiser hired more than 6,300 people, including nearly 4,700 in care delivery and 1,684 in Alliance-represented roles, with a 92% retention rate.

Guzynski said the main barriers to reaching a deal include compensation, benefits, and recognition of the professions' contributions to patient outcomes.

"Unfortunately, Kaiser's proposals have included reductions to retirement and higher employee health care costs," he said. "The main sticking points are compensation and benefits, specifically, compensation that values the professions' contributions to patient care."

Sims said Kaiser is continuing to bargain in good faith and called the strike "a common bargaining tactic meant to raise awareness of the union's key interests." He added the decision to call for a strike was "disappointing given Kaiser Permanente is scheduled to continue our negotiations with UNAC/UHCP on multiple dates in September."

Guzynski said burnout has further eroded morale. "Constant pressure increases emotional stress and makes it more challenging to retain experienced staff at the bedside," he said. "That's why we are demanding fair pay, protection of retirement and health benefits, and enforceable staffing commitments."

Union representatives said shortages have led to care delays. "We've had operating rooms sit empty because there weren't enough nurse anesthetists to cover cases," said Jeff Cathcart, a Kaiser CRNA. "That directly impacts patient access to care."

Kaiser rebutted that assertion. Sims said medical offices and hospitals, including the Roseville Medical Center, remained open during the strike with contingency staffing in place. "We take any threat to disrupt patient care seriously, and our highest priority is their care and well-being," Sims said.

The strike began at 7 a.m. on Sept. 8 and ended 24 hours later. Sims said only 1,300 of Kaiser's 90,000 Northern California health professionals participated.

The action comes amid a rise in health care unionization nationwide. According to National Labor Relations Board data, union election petitions have more than doubled since 2021, increasing 27% from fiscal year 2023 to 2024.

Guzynski said the strike was structured to minimize disruption. "Our patients are always our top priority," he said. "We struck for one day precisely because we want to avoid long-term harm to care access. The greater risk is if Kaiser continues to undervalue and drive away midwives and CRNAs."

Guzynski said the union remains willing to negotiate but is prepared to escalate if necessary. "We hope Kaiser comes to the table in good faith, because our goal is resolution, not disruption. But if they continue to undervalue us, we are ready to escalate," he said.

Sims emphasized that a resolution was possible. "We're confident that we'll address key issues and reach an agreement that supports the needs of our employees and affordability for our members, and reinforces Kaiser Permanente as the best place to work and receive care," he said.