

Op Ed Column for the Altoona Mirror

**ARHS: Generous Contract Offer for Nurses
Protects RNs' Rights to Freely Choose Unionization**

By James W. Barner
President/Chief Executive Officer
Altoona Regional Health System

Would a hospital ever compromise the care of its community? Absolutely not.

Many of your children were born at Altoona Regional Health System (ARHS), we've tended to your wounds and conditions, and the hospital has been the cavalry when you needed an emergency room to treat your loved ones.

That same high level of care can be seen in every aspect of our treatment of registered nurses. We are obligated to balance top care with superior working conditions and benefits for our nurses. This is the cornerstone of our position in our contract negotiations with the trade union that is bargaining on behalf of the system's registered nurses.

Several months ago, a union came to the hospital and solicited just enough votes from our RNs to allow the union to negotiate with ARHS on a new contract (and 43 percent of our nurses voted against this union representation). With this vote, our nurses did nothing more than tell the union to see what they could do in getting a new contract. That's an honest human response: see if the grass is greener on the other side of the fence.

Once the union got to the bargaining table, out came its true motive: it wants the hospital system to agree that all nurses be required to join the union or be fired, and that all nurses would be required to pay 1.8 percent of their salary to the union. For the average full-time RN, that would equal approximately \$864 per year.

The ARHS Board of Directors, along with a unanimous vote of the Medical Staff Leadership at the system, weighed the following facts:

- We believed that no RN should be fired if he/she doesn't desire to join the union
- 43 percent of the RNs voting last year opposed the union
- The administration received a petition from more than 100 of our nurses, pleading with us to not force union membership, dues, and fees on them
- We have a strong moral belief that in America everyone should have the right to choose.

Therefore, ARHS insisted an agreement with the union must include the following:

- 1) Balance with our community responsibility to be a financially viable hospital
- 2) Respect for nurses by letting them choose whether to join the union

*Written By Ken Hunter, APR
khunter@PowerStationComms.com / 908-295-8946*

ARHS offered a very fair contract, with a 13.5% pay increase for RNs over three years. In addition, nurses will continue to pay only 10 percent of their health insurance premiums, which is an enormous financial burden lifted from our nurses.

Additionally, ARHS has dropped nurse overtime to such a low level that our nurses on average have just 1.1 hours of overtime per week – of which 95 percent is absolutely voluntary. “Mandatory” overtime averages just over three MINUTES per day per nurse. That does not sacrifice patient safety, and makes for a terrific workplace.

We urge the community to see past the emotions, rallies, and theatrics to view how generously we treat our nurses. This is not a negotiation over patient safety and respect for human beings. It’s a negotiation over union power.

###