

Critical Questions Answered #3



As you likely know, the Montana Nurses Association (MNA) has launched a drive to win the right to become the paid representative for registered nurses at Northwest Healthcare (NWHC). As part of their drive to represent our registered nurses, the MNA has been making promises and spreading a fair amount of misinformation. In this newsletter, we will answer commonly asked questions and attempt to set the record straight regarding the MNA's sales campaign.

"The nurses feel like they need protection from Administration and that is why they want the union. How do you respond?"

We understand that some employee feel that the union might offer them protection; however, many of our other nurses have worked in unionized hospitals and understand that collective bargaining is a less than perfect model for solving problems.

We have had to make some tough decisions this year, like deciding not to provide merit increases in response to economic conditions. *In spite of this decision, NWHC RNs still received significant market adjustment increases* (the first paid in July 2009 and the second to be paid in January 2010) reflecting our commitment to NWHC RNs to remain competitive in the market.

However, as we have said (and as the union has confirmed) MNA-represented nurses at the Billings Clinic did not receive a wage increase this year. The union acknowledged the economic downturn's impact on the Billings Clinic. *Did the MNA acknowledge this same economic impact on Billings' RNs by not requiring them to pay union dues in light of receiving no wage increases? We doubt it!*

We don't think that unionization is an appropriate "answer" for Northwest Healthcare; we do think that we need to spend more time improving communication and mutual understanding in our organization. We are committed to working with our nurses - and all NWHC employees - to make all of our staff feel as though their concerns are being heard.

"The union's campaign seems to have stalled, has the union gone away?"

No. In fact on Tuesday, August 25th, the union's professional organizer called our administrative team. Two members of our team took his phone call, allowed him to ask questions and provided him with honest answers.

During the telephone call the union's organizer informed us of his intention to continue his organizing efforts at NWHC. He also requested that Administration agree to sign a formal "Neutrality Agreement." These agreements dictate that management stay "neutral" on the topic of unionization, and remain silent as union organizers go about the business of trying to convince employees to sign union authorization cards (or petitions) in support of the union.

In essence, the union wants NWHC to agree not to discuss the union with our nurses. Union organizers like these agreements because they make the process of organizing a lot easier for them.

Here is the problem we see with "Neutrality Agreements:" In their effort to sell employees on the idea of union membership, union organizers sometimes exaggerate the benefits of unionization, while minimizing some of the very serious downsides of being in a union (*like the potential for lost flexibility or the possibility that you might be forced to pay dues in order to continue working at NWHC*).

By signing a "Neutrality Agreement" we would be deprived of our right to freely discuss this issue with employees as we all, *collectively*, consider the impact unionization might have at NWHC.

We expressed this feeling to the union organizer, who several times responded that our refusal to sign their agreement might result in "bringing the community into this", which we view as launching a *negative public image campaign* against our hospital.

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What is a "negative public image campaign?"

A "negative public image campaign" is essentially a public smear campaign, in which a union attempts to soil the public image of an employer (In this case NWHC) as a means to force the employer to agree to their demands (which, in this case, would mean signing their Neutrality Agreement).

The public image and reputation of NWHC is something we have all worked very hard to build. Members of the community know that when they come to NWHC they will receive the highest quality and most compassionate care in their hour of greatest need. Over the years, the residents of Kalispell and surrounding communities have come to rely on all of us. This is an honor that, everyday, we strive to live up to.

We sincerely hope that the union's professional organizer will not seek to destroy what we have all worked so hard to build, in his effort to gain more members and dues income for his organization.

"Is it true that Administration pressured leaders of the local Lutheran Church not to allow the MNA to have a meeting on church premises?"

No. We have heard that some of the union's supporters are circulating this rumor and you should know that it is simply not true.

"Administration says that our Charge Nurses are supervisors, the union says they are not, who is telling the truth?"

The union's professional organizer mentioned this during his phone call to Administration. He told us that in many of the situations in which MNA represents nurses – the Charge Nurses are included in the union. It is also true that most of these hospitals are probably much smaller than NWHC.

Fortunately, the union's organizer does not get to decide arbitrarily who should be included and who should be excluded from a voting unit. If the union does gain enough support to file a petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) it will be a professional at the NLRB who would make this decision.

We have had a complete review of this issue and are comfortable that based on current NLRB case law our Charge Nurses would be classified as supervisors under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA); and, because of their supervisory status, would not be included in a voting unit.

**Remember: Your signature is valuable to the MNA!
A union card is a legal document.**

Get all the facts and please do not sign a card in support of the MNA unless you are absolutely sure it is something you want to do.

If there was ever a vote at NWHC, all eligible registered nurses would be entitled to vote – even if they never signed a card or petition in support of the union.