



TUESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2006

## Area unions appeal for required nurse ratio

By Stephen Franklin,  
Tribune staff reporter

Saying better nurse-staffing levels would protect patients, officials from two Chicago-area unions vowed Monday to step up their drive for state approval of mandatory nursing ratios at Illinois hospitals.

California is the only state that mandates nursing levels, the result of a 1999 law. But the law did not take effect until 2004 because of legal challenges and the need to determine the ratios for different hospital units.

In California, one nurse is required for each operating room patient, while one can handle six patients in a general medical ward. And the bills in the Illinois legislature backed by the unions would similarly impose varying ratios.

Liz Jacobs, a spokeswoman for the California Nurses Association, was optimistic the effort would succeed in Illinois, saying California's experience should prove nursing ratios can help solve hospitals' problems.

Hospital officials commonly complain that the lack of nurses has forced them to scamper to find new staff, and raised their labor expenses. In turn, nurses talk about understaffing that leaves them overworked and endangers their patients.

Jacobs' group is the parent for the National Nurses Organizing Committee, which last year won the support of Cook County's 1,800 nurses in a bitter election battle with the Illinois Nurses Association.

The other union support came from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which represents nurses at state correctional facilities and has also been trying to organize workers at Resurrection Health Care hospitals in the Chicago area.

Union officials said they would back similar bills sponsored by State Rep. Mary Flowers (D-Chicago) and State Sen. Iris Martinez (D-Chicago).

"The hospitals say there is a nursing shortage, but we say that

if you create safe hospitals, nurses will come back. They are there," said Jacobs.

But Howard Peters, a lobbyist for the Illinois Hospital Association, which represents about 200 public and private facilities, said that such ratios would only create more problems for hospitals. "This is a terrible idea," he said. "All it does is create an artificial competition and exacerbate the nurse shortage."

He noted that similar efforts to set a nursing ratio have failed in the state legislature in recent years while other steps to improve hospitals' care and accountability have been passed.

By union officials' count, similar efforts are under way in a dozen other states.

Amid complaints from California hospital officials that they could not implement all of the ratios, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger had sought to scale back some requirements. But he gave up that effort last year after several California courts upheld the ratios.