

August 18, 2021

Green Mountain Care Board  
Attn: Chairman Kevin Mullin  
State Street  
Montpelier, VT

Dear Chairman Mullin and Members of the Green Mountain Care Board,

We are writing today to share our concerns regarding the budget submitted by the University of Vermont Medical Center. It is our position that the submitted budget will not allow UVMMC to recruit and retain the staff we need for our hospital to continue to provide the high quality of care we are known for. UVMMC is amid a staffing crisis—we do not have the staff we need to safely care for the number of patients seeking help at our hospital.

UVMMC currently employs approximately 222 travelers who work in many departments across the hospital. At the time we are writing this, there are 243 positions open in the VFNHP bargaining unit alone. Of those 243 positions, 206 are for nursing. On October 1<sup>st</sup>, the hospital will also add over 70 FTEs to fulfil the terms of the Unit Staffing Collaborative the hospital cites in its letter, creating more open positions. In addition to that, your Board just approved the opening of 15 additional beds in an already overcrowded, understaffed hospital. These fifteen beds will require an additional 22 nursing FTEs of nurses to care for the patients in those beds. **We do not currently have the staff to care for these patients.**

It is not only our bargaining unit members that are feeling the crisis. There are not enough housekeepers to clean our patient rooms, causing delays in room turnover on the units and creating longer wait times in the Emergency room. Our dietary services are understaffed, and patients are waiting up to 2 hours for their meal tray to be delivered. Units often have half the LNAs their staffing grids call for, leading to LNAs doing the work of 2 people and/or RNs taking on additional tasks to help. Contributing to the LNA short staffing is a lack of enough Mental Health Techs or Clinical Patient Safety Attendant to sit with psychiatric patients, often requiring LNAs to be taken off their floor assignment to fill this position. This takes valuable support staff off the floor, leading to longer wait times for patients to be turned, bathed, ambulated etc. We could go on and on.

Patient backlogs in the ambulatory setting have increased patient wait times & are causing delays in access to care. Patients are waiting weeks to months to be seen by their Primary Care Provider or Clinical Specialists. Patients who need diagnostic or maintenance imaging are also waiting weeks to months for an appointment. As a result, these patients are being advised to seek care in our already overburdened Emergency Department and Urgent Care. This budget talks about starting the much-needed expansion of our ED, but again, who will staff those additional beds?

When we look at the submitted budget, we see a lot of money slated for building projects, including a new ambulatory surgical center. We agree these are needed to meet the increasing number of patients we are seeing but that is only half the equation. We must ask, once these buildings are built, who will care for the patients in them? We cannot keep up with the turnover we are seeing in our staff. UVMMC continues to try to hire, but the number of staff leaving outpaces the number of staff coming in. The only number that seems to be growing is the number of executives at the network level. The nursing shortage, combined with an ever-growing number of vacancies, has made the market for healthcare workers extremely competitive. **To recruit and retain health care staff, UVMMC needs to be more competitive.**

We recently signed multiple agreements with the hospital to help staff units, including a higher differential pay and retention bonuses for the OR. In most patient care areas in the hospital, we are offering a 100% differential to your base pay when you sign up for extra shifts. It is not enough; our staff are still getting up to five or six calls a day asking them to come in to meet staffing needs. This is not sustainable and is only contributing to staff burnout.

There is no investment or incentive for employees to stay at UVMMC; they are not just leaving to work at another hospital; they are leaving our state and /or our professions. The hospital recently gave a 2% market adjustment to all employees except bargaining unit members and physicians, but it is still not enough to attract new employees or retain the ones we have.

We do understand the need to add building and expand bed capacity to meet the needs of the increasing number of patients we are treating, but how will we do that effectively without safe staffing? We feel that this budget is taking the second step before the first. UVMMC needs to invest in the recruitment and retention of staff so we can care for the patients we have in tandem with their investments into buildings and projects.

Please feel free to reach out with any question or concerns you may have.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Deb Snell, RN CCRN

President VFNHP

On behalf of the Executive Board of the Vermont Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals.