

Staff layoffs at Taunton's Morton Hospital a possibility

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Taunton — Steward Health Care System is now proposing to lay off members of the staff at Morton Hospital, which it bought last year when the institution was facing tens of millions of dollars in debt mostly related to employee pensions.

Steward proposed laying off eight workers at Morton Hospital from a range of positions, according to the service employees union there. The private health care company, owned by the New York-based private equity firm Cerberus Capital Management, is citing the economic climate and health care reforms as the reason.

A spokesperson for 1199SEIU, which now represents nearly 500 workers at Morton since employees voted to unionize in October, said on Monday that the union is now actively negotiating with Steward over the layoffs.

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“Since workers at Morton voted to form a union with 1199SEIU, they now have a legal right to a voice in the process,” said 1199SEIU Vice President Enid Eckstein. “Impacted union members will have a range of protected options moving forward. Right now, 1199SEIU members at Steward facilities are actively engaged in discussions regarding the proposed layoffs and are focused on the goals of saving jobs where possible and ensuring quality care.”

In addition to Morton, Steward also proposed cutting 15 union jobs at Norwood Hospital and laying off 12 others at Carney Hospital in Dorchester. With a plan to make them profitable, Steward has purchased a collection of 11 community hospital in Massachusetts since 2010, including Saint Anne's Hospital in Fall River (a non-union hospital), Quincy Medical Center, Carney Hospital in Dorchester and Good Samaritan Hospital in Brockton.

When Steward bought Morton, it made a commitment to spend \$120 million on improvements to the hospital, but it also promised to maintain “key jobs” and to maintain benefit levels.

Last week, Morton Hospital President Kim Bassett sent out a message to employees about the proposed layoffs, referring to “challenging times” in the health care industry, the state’s recently enacted health care cost legislation that caps health care cost increases at 3.6 percent annually, and federal cuts to Medicare reimbursements.

“The economic climate has created challenges for every hospital in Massachusetts,” Bassett said. “Our health care model is meant to be flexible enough to accommodate market and business fluctuations. At various times, individual hospitals make small adjustments to staffing to meet patient volume requirements and community needs. Individual markets and local community utilization determine the necessary staffing levels for each hospital in the Steward system. Morton Hospital is no exception. We have made a small staffing adjustment to adjust to our current community utilization and volume.”

Steward spokesperson Christopher Murphy, who provided Bassett’s statement, declined to speak about the specifics of staffing cuts at Morton.

Bassett said when a distressed hospital joins Steward, it is expected to improve its operating performance as time goes by, while investments are made in services and infrastructure.

“These strategic capital investments are designed to improve our ability to meet the needs of our community and position us for long-term growth and sustainability,” Bassett said. “For example, through capital provided by our system we are building a new Emergency Department to serve our community. We are also acquiring a new CT scanner, replacing our mobile MRI with a fixed wide bore MRI machine and we have completed renovations to our main lobby. We continue to invest in our IT infrastructure and quality and safety advancements like the eICU.”

1199SEIU said its members recently negotiated terms with hospital management at Morton to ensure options for impacted workers, including nine-month recall rights for employees who are laid off and severance packages for those who are laid off (one week pay for each year of service up to 26 weeks). Negotiated terms for employees whose hours may be reduced provide the opportunity for workers to exercise their right to a layoff if they like, the union said.

1199SEIU said the negotiations also included terms that all open positions should be frozen to give priority to laid-off union members, while union members will also be given a list of open positions at Good Samaritan Hospital and Saint Anne’s Hospital. The terms also include that no full-time or part-time employees will be laid off before any per-diem employee who holds regular hours, 1199SEIU said.

The union said that management and the union would sit down and separately discuss the impact of layoffs at Morton Hospital's Sleep Lab. In the event the Sleep Lab expands in the future, members will have the right to recall to recreated positions, the 1199SEIU said.

The employees who joined 1199SEIU at Morton included respiratory therapists, radiology technicians, licensed practical nurses, nurse assistants, housekeepers, environmental service workers, dietary workers and others.

In June, Steward laid off an undisclosed amount of employees at Morton when the hospital's home care division was eliminated. Steward also laid off an unspecified amount of employees during a "minor reduction in staffing levels" at Saint Anne's Hospital in April, citing a decrease in patient volume last winter.

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