

Sacramento Press Club Journalism Awards

Entry in: Audio/Radio - State Politics or Policy Feature Submission

Kate Wolffe

Hospitals and counties balk at proposed bill to pay health care workers \$25/hr

Link to story (w/embedded audio) [on CapRadio's website](#)

DREW SANDSOR, HOST: Hospitals and workers agree - California has a healthcare staffing shortage. What they don't agree on? Is how to fix it. Democrats in the state legislature are pushing to increase the minimum wage for health care workers to 25 dollars an hour...giving raises to almost half a million people. But hospitals, counties, and business groups say now isn't the right time. CapRadio's Health Care Reporter Kate Wolffe has the story:

KATE WOLFFE, BYLINE: Georgette Bradford considers herself blessed. She's been with Kaiser Permanente in Sacramento for 19 years, and feels she makes a fair wage. But that's not true for some of her coworkers, who are medical assistants, personal care aides and food service workers:

GEORGETTE BRADFORD: We have members that work in the hospital but may have to live in their cars. We have members that work in the hospital and have to have two or three jobs to make ends meet.

WOLFFE: She doesn't think that's good for anybody - not her coworkers nor the patients they serve:

BRADFORD: I don't know about you, but I would not want someone who's working on two or 3 hours of sleep doing my prep for my surgery.

WOLFFE: And often when they leave - due to stress or injury or burnout - it's tough to recruit new people.

BRADFORD: In some instances they can make just as much money at Hobby Lobby, In-N-Out Burger and not put themselves at risk for catching a disease.

WOLFFE: Thousands of people who work in health care facilities, or as home health aides, make California's minimum wage of 15 dollars and fifty cents an hour.

According to a study by UC Berkeley's labor center, which says it advocates for working families, about three quarters of people who do this kind of work are women, mostly women of color. And they're the primary breadwinners for their households.

Democratic State Senator Maria Elena Durazo thinks a pay raise would help.

MARIA ELENA DURAZO: To say that it's okay to make \$32,000 a year is unacceptable or should be unacceptable. Moving that to \$50,000 a year is much more along the lines of what it takes to survive.

WOLFFE: She thinks most hospitals can afford to pay more.

DURAZO: We feel very comfortable that there are both public and private sector hospitals that are doing fine. But for those hospitals that are not doing well, we ought to have a plan for them.

SARAH BRIDGE: They're already on the brink.

WOLFFE: Sarah Bridge lobbies for health facilities in remote and rural places. She's with the Association of California Health Care Districts, which represents many of those local government-run systems.

BRIDGE: We've come out of the pandemic and we're looking to provide services to communities and our financial position is much different than it was pre-COVID,

WOLFFE: Already this year, a community hospital in Madera closed and another one in Visalia laid off more than 130 staff. Several others have warned they're in dire financial straits. Bridge says they can't afford to raise the minimum wage:

BRIDGE: It will lead to closures because if you can't afford to meet the mandate, you will have to make decisions of services to cut.

WOLFFE: County governments and the state's business community are also opposed to the bill. The California Chamber of Commerce calls it a "job killer" that would cost

8 billion dollars annually. That label historically signifies a steep road to becoming law.

However, Durazo's bill passed the Senate, and is currently being shaped in the Assembly. She says she'll be taking the needs of health care providers into account:

DURAZO: We do care about those hospitals, whether they're in the urban areas or in a rural area. We care about everyone having access.

WOLFFE: The challenge is preserving that access — balancing the needs of workers with keeping remote hospitals open. In Sacramento, I'm Kate Wolffe