



# SCAM SHEET

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## Ex-Sutter Executive: Fired for Speaking Out About Short Staffing

Sutter's practice of cutting staffing levels in its hospitals has reached such dramatic proportions that it's leading to broken bones and the retaliatory firing of at least one top executive, according to a former Sutter manager. In May of 2000, Laura Adams, who earned \$100,000 a year as the Director of Post-Acute Services at Sutter's California Pacific Medical Center, sued the hospital alleging that she was wrongfully fired for speaking out against staffing cuts that created unsafe conditions for patients.

Adams told her superiors that staffing cuts, or a "reduction in force," implemented in 1999 caused patient care to suffer. According to the lawsuit, Adams analyzed patient-care data from the hospital and "discovered that, as a result of the reduction in force - which necessitated fewer nurses working more hours - exhausted nurses were over and under-medicating patients. For example, one patient was mistakenly given 24 medications instead of 2 medications and, as a result, had to be sent to the Intensive Care Unit."

The lawsuit, which was filed in California Superior Court, goes on to note that "following the reduction, patients were left unattended for prolonged periods of time, which resulted in the following: patients falling and breaking bones; incontinent patients remaining wet; patients not having their dressings changed; and patients not being bathed."

Although Adams "complained that patients' basic needs were not being

met," the hospital did not hire more nurses to provide improved service to patients. According to the suit, days after Adams held staff meetings "to specifically discuss the issues of inadequate staffing and patients' not receiving the most basic care," she was fired.

## Sutter Physician: Staffing Levels Were Cut in Half

Former executives are not the only ones talking about the staffing cuts at Sutter hospitals. In the January 2001 edition of *San Francisco* magazine, Dr. John Fletcher, a longtime staff member at California Pacific Medical Center (CPMC), reports that "... we have half the employees per patient that we used to have. And it's not just nurses [leaving], but dietitians, housekeepers, and administration."

Deep staffing cuts are confirmed by the hospital's own data, which is published by the California Office of Statewide Health Planning & Development. According to these figures, CPMC cut the number of staff hours per patient by 23% from 1994 to 1999.

The magazine article includes quotes from a number of hospital employees and patients' family members that give more detail to the deepening staffing crisis at the hospital. "Care has been declining here for several years," reports a longtime nurse. "Patients are complaining, but there's nothing we can do. We feel helpless. We're short of staff and we're having to cut corners."

Another nurse quoted in the article states: "I've seen people falling out of beds because of short staffing." And still another nurse admits, "There's always an accident waiting to happen. We all say it: We just don't have enough support."

The magazine also interviewed the son of Pat Steger, a former society columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* who died at

the hospital from complications following surgery. Steger often wrote about the hospital's fund-raising events and had friends on the board of directors. Steger's son, who filed a complaint with medical authorities about his mother's care, says: "The impression I had was that each patient is treated like a commodity. It was as though each patient is costing the hospital X dollars and how can they recoup that money?"

## Sutter Alone in Refusing Safe-Staffing Proposal

Despite the well-chronicled staffing problems at Sutter facilities, Sutter Health is the only major hospital system in Northern California that refuses to establish a safe-staffing system.

Caregivers at six Sutter hospitals have proposed that the hospitals adopt a safe-staffing system that has already been implemented at 25 hospitals throughout Northern California, including hospitals owned by Kaiser Permanente, Catholic Healthcare West, Alameda County and independent providers such as Washington Hospital and Chinese Hospital. In fact, even for-profit Prison Health Services, a national investor-owned company, has implemented the system at its Alameda County facilities.

Under the proposal, the Sutter hospitals would establish a joint committee composed of equal numbers of frontline caregivers and hospital managers where committee members would work together to reach staffing solutions that work for patients and the hospital. In the event that the committees become deadlocked on an issue, a neutral health care expert would settle the difference.

Sutter's refusal to adopt a reasonable and widely accepted approach to the growing short-staffing crisis at its hospitals sends a clear and unfortunate message to consumers, caregivers and the public: At Sutter Health, profits are more important than patients.

The Sutter Scam Sheet is published by the Health Care Workers Union, Local 250 SEIU, to update elected officials, regulators, District and Community hospitals, industry insiders, consumers, labor unions and other healthcare purchasers about our campaign to Stop the Sutter Scam.

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