Oakland County public health nurses voice concerns over lack of pay raise; seeking comparable wage

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Posted: 09/09/16, 3:58 PM EDT | Updated: 1 day ago

Oakland County public health nurses stood before the Oakland County Board of Commissioners last week urging county officials to hear their proposal for a more substantial wage increase.

More than 20 public health nurses attended expressing their concerns over the lack of increase and salaries that are lower than other public health nurses in comparable counties in Michigan. While some of the leadership is supportive, others said higher raises to make up for prior cuts cannot be afforded in Oakland County.

Contract negotiations are ongoing with the Oakland County Human Resources Department. Five of the seven bargaining meetings have been completed. The final two meetings will be held Tuesday and Sept. 28.

In 2010, Oakland County public health nurses began to take pay cuts, 2.5 percent each year, over a three-year period.

“Since that time we have seen modest increases that have slowly brought us just above our 2010 wages,” said Anne Steep, president of the Michigan Nurses Association local union that represents Oakland County public health nurses during labor negotiations. “These wages have not even begun to keep pace with the cost of living.”
The county is suggesting a 2-percent wage increase for Fiscal Year 2017.

Steep said it’s not just about a wage increase but respect.

“We understand the economic realities and none of us took a position with Oakland County because of wages,” said Steep. “All we are asking for is respect, safety and a fair wage. That is not happening within the framework of our current negotiations.”

According to the results of a salary survey, that was referenced by the MNA at the last bargaining session on Aug. 25, Oakland County public health nurses are paid less than public health nurses in nearby comparable counties such as Kent, Washtenaw and Genesee. The county presented their own report, which according to Steep, also showed Oakland County public health nurses being paid 10 to 16 percent less than those nurses in comparable counties.

Here is what the salary survey concluded:

- Public Health Nurse 1 average annual salary:
  - Genesee County: $60,945
  - Washtenaw County: $56,901
  - Oakland County: $49,980

- Public Health Nurse 2 average annual salary:
  - Kent County: $62,878
  - Washtenaw County: $59,724
  - Oakland County: $55,749

A public health nurse 1 in Oakland County is required to have a Bachelor’s Degree in nursing from an accredited college or have an Associates Degree in nursing.

A public health nurse 2 in Oakland County must have a Bachelor’s Degree in nursing as well as a license from the Michigan Board of Nursing.

Earlier this year wage increases were given to a number of groups within Oakland County, according to Steep.

“In particular it came to our attention that the sanitarians had received a 12 to 13 percent wage increase,” said Steep. “We contacted the county and reminded them that we had a ‘Me Too’ clause in our contract as well as a well-known practice of wage parity between sanitarians and the public health nurses.”

A “Me Too” clause is found in some labor union contracts that states one bargaining unit will accept the terms negotiated by another bargaining unit specific to a certain area of the contract. This is referred to as a automatic contract upgrade when another union bargains better benefits.

Steep said at the most recent bargaining meeting wage data from 19 counties was presented and showed that Oakland County public health nurses are paid less.

Steep said this affords the nurses the same increase.
Several Oakland County Public Health Nurses speak out:

• Tarrie Frank said: “I’ve been a public health nurse for 20 years. Oakland County is one of the richest counties in the state and we are not being paid comparable with other counties in the state, We aren’t in this for the money but we do need to be compensated. All of our ideas aren’t bad when it comes to negotiating and bargaining.”

• Jane DeBoer-Rowse: “We request that we get equal treatment and that our pay is increased just as our supervisors got back in January.”

• Susan Burns: “I have been privileged to work here as a public health nurse for 16 years, 10 of which is full-time. Years ago being a public health nurse in Oakland County was a coveted position within the nursing community. If a nurse worked for Oakland County they had got to be good. There was a long list of nurses waiting to be hired but there is no list now. It’s now a stepping-stone job and we have inadequate staffing. We have all taken pay cuts because of the passion about what we do. We love what we do.”

• Gloria Lutey: “We serve the most vulnerable populations and very complex cases for families. We help families and do nurturing family programs in that they learn how to be good parents. I’m very proud to be apart of this health division.”

County Commissioners address wage increase request:

County Commissioner Dave Woodward said he supports a higher wage increase.

“Our public health nurses deserve a raise,” said Woodward. “There are a dozen open nursing positions at our health department, and the county’s own data confirms that RNs are earning far less in Oakland County than in other similar departments across Michigan. To retain and attract the best talent to work the front lines of public health in Oakland County we need to pay better, otherwise we all suffer — especially the most vulnerable.”

County Commissioner Shelley Taub said all county employees should be treated equal when it comes to wage increases.

“In Oakland County everyone has always been paid equally to my knowledge. Everyone gets the same pay raise across the board. No one gets any more or any less. It was awful for all of us to take pay cuts. I’m not aware that they (Oakland County public health nurses) took any more cuts than anyone else in the county.

“I pride myself on treating everyone the same and I know our public health nurses are very valuable people. I understand that. I would love to give everyone a 10 to 20 percent pay raise. I sympathize with them wanting more pay but the county policy is everyone always gets the same raise or decrease despite what others of comparable position are being paid in other counties. We have set a long policy of treating everyone the same when it comes to pay increases.”