



April 9, 2026

Subject: Testimony in Support of H-7031, Joint Resolution Creating a Joint Legislative Study Commission on Safe Staffing in Hospitals — Submitted by a Member of SEIU 1199NE

Dear Chairwoman Donovan and Honorable Members of the House Committee on Health & Human Services:

I have been a unit secretary for detox and general treatment at Butler Hospital for the past five years. I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 7031, creating a special legislative commission to study safe staffing ratios in hospitals.

My firsthand experience coordinating admissions for our units gives me a unique, front-row view of how staffing shortages directly impact safety in our hospital. Inadequate staffing isn't just an operational issue, it is a primary driver of violent escalations in our facilities. We are often told to "make it work," but that leads to patients waiting longer, not receiving the care they need when they need it, and staff burning out. You can only ask so much of one person, whether a nurse or a patient, before it becomes too much.

Safety must be judged not just by the number of staff on a unit, but by the acuity of the patients being treated. Every case is different. High acuity combined with low staffing creates what we call a "flashpoint" for patient agitation, the moment when tensions escalate and situations can quickly become dangerous. It can also lead to a "Code Grey," meaning a unit is so short-staffed that it cannot respond to emergencies elsewhere without creating new risks within its own unit.

Hospital management must consider staffing based on acuity, not just numbers. A fixed number on paper cannot reflect the real needs of our units, especially in programs like detox. When we cannot meet patients' needs due to understaffing, it leads to frustration, anger, and at times, physical incidents. Staff are injured and forced onto medical leave.

We urge you to support this bill and stand with healthcare workers across Rhode Island. Please pass House Bill 7031 to make our hospitals safer.

Sincerely,

K-Lee Butler, Unit Secretary
Butler Hospital