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**Testimony of Hannah Drummond, RN
On Behalf of National Nurses United
Before the Subcommittee on Primary Health & Retirement Security for the
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
April 1, 2024
Hearing on “When Health Care Becomes Wealth Care: How Corporate Greed Puts Patient
Care and Health Workers at Risk”**

Good morning and thank you, Chairman Markey, Ranking Member Marshall, and Members of the Subcommittee, for giving me the opportunity to testify here today. My name is Hannah Drummond, and I am a registered nurse in the Emergency Department at Mission Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina. I have been a nurse for over a decade, and I am the Chief Nurse Representative at Mission Hospital for National Nurses Organizing Committee, an affiliate of National Nurses United.

National Nurses United is the largest union and professional association of registered nurses (RNs) in the United States, representing nearly 225,000 nurses across the country. Nurses witness in real time the repercussions that our flawed for-profit health care system gives rise to, including the severe nurse staffing crisis the United States is facing today and the negative impact on patient care.

In my testimony today, I will be illustrating the impacts of poor hospital conditions, including understaffing of nurses and other hospital staff, the reduction of essential health care services, and the role that hospital management plays in perpetuating these issues through profit-driven decisions.

I started working at Mission Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina, in 2019 as a travel nurse, and I loved it so much I decided to join the full-time staff. Mission Health was formerly a non-profit community hospital system and considered the hub for the entire Western half of the state to access health care, including the rural Appalachian region. In the same year I joined Mission, our six-hospital system, with nearly 12,000 workers, was bought out by Healthcare Corporation of America (HCA) Healthcare.¹

HCA Healthcare is the largest health care corporation in the United States, which as of 2020 operates 186 hospitals in twenty-one states.² HCA has consistently acquired more hospitals, clinics, and other health facilities across the country. Before the acquisition was approved by regulatory authorities, an asset purchase agreement was negotiated by the North Carolina Attorney General to include safeguards surrounding the health care services HCA would be required to provide to the community, including maintaining services offered in Mission’s rural hospitals for five-to-ten years.³

¹ Citizen Times. “Today’s the day: Asheville’s Mission Health, HCA Healthcare finalize \$1.5B deal.” Published Feb. 1, 2019. Accessed Mar. 28, 2024: <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2019/02/01/ashevilles-mission-health-hca-healthcare-finalize-1-5-billion-deal/2721743002/>

² HCA Healthcare Factsheet. June 30, 2020. Available at: <https://hcahealthcare.com/util/forms/press-kit/2020-healthcare-fact-sheet-a.pdf>

³ Amended and Restated Asset Purchase Agreement. Available at: <https://searchwnc.files.wordpress.com/2020/02/amended-and-restated-apa-main-text-public.pdf>

However, I quickly began to see concerning changes in our hospital after HCA's purchase, which were validated by the frustrations shared with me from other nurses. I started to notice a decrease in the quality of supplies—every time I went into the supply closet, there were shoddier supplies that often did not work. As time went on, hospital managers began cutting staff. For registered nurses, our staffing levels were reduced to unsafe levels, and we noticed cuts in other hospital staff, including translators and security personnel. When we brought these concerns to management, they ignored us. It became clear that HCA management would interact with health care workers in a way that ignored our clinical education and expertise.

As nurses, we quickly understood the danger our community faced after HCA Healthcare, a for-profit health care conglomerate, bought our hospital system. That prompted our decision to organize our workplace and join a union just weeks before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

When we began our union organizing drive, we were met with an onslaught of union-busting tactics from hospital management. Meanwhile, the working conditions and patient care in our hospital continued to deteriorate because management refused to address critical issues.

Despite a global pandemic demonstrating the need for health care systems to invest resources in better equipping hospitals to protect patients and health care workers, HCA management continued to cut staff, services, and supplies at Mission. We had to fight tooth and nail to get the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and for management to provide the federally required fit testing to ensure N95 respirators adequately fit and protect individuals wearing them. As registered nurses, we are at high risk for Covid exposure and illness. Due to management's failure to provide fit tests to every health care worker, one of my nurse colleagues died. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) of North Carolina Department of Labor (DOL) cited and penalized HCA Mission Hospital nearly \$30,000 for failing to conduct annual fit tests and failing to notify the DOL of the death of an employee due to Covid-19 in a timely manner.⁴

We have consistently had a crisis in our nurse staffing levels since HCA purchased our hospitals. Nurses are constantly directed to care for more patients with higher acuity. The levels of available staff and clinical resources are consistently decreasing. Management has moved and expanded units without increasing the number of nurses working on those units. Management's intentional short staffing is so pervasive that they refuse to staff the sterile processing department, which often means nurses and doctors in the operating room struggle to find sterile and safe equipment for surgery.

There are decades of scientific evidence confirming that when registered nurses are forced to care for too many patients at one time, patients are at higher risk of preventable medical errors, avoidable complications, falls and injuries,⁵ pressure ulcers,⁶ increased length of hospital stay, higher numbers of hospital readmissions, and death.⁷ Because of HCA's intentional decisions to short staff our hospital, I have watched patients die because they did not receive the care they needed and deserved. As a nurse, we experience deep moral injury when we are not able to provide

⁴ National Nurses United. Press Release, "HCA's Mission Hospital penalized nearly \$30,000 for failing to protect nurses and other health care workers from Covid-19." Available at: <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/press/hca-mission-hospital-penalized-for-failing-to-protect-nurses>

⁵ Kim J, Lee E, Jung Y, Kwon H, Lee S. Patient-level and organizational-level factors influencing in-hospital falls. *J Adv Nurs*. 2022. Nov;78(11):3641-3651. doi: 10.1111/jan.15254. Epub 2022 Apr 20. PMID: 35441709; PMCID: PMC9790490.

⁶ Kim J, Lee JY, Lee E. Risk factors for newly acquired pressure ulcer and the impact of nurse staffing on pressure ulcer incidence. *J Nurs Manag*. 2022 Jul;30(5):01-09. doi: 10.1111/jonm.12928. Epub 2020 Feb 25. PMID: 31811735; PMCID: PMC9545092.

⁷ Increased LOS, Mortality and Readmission: Dierkes, A. M., Aiken, L. H., Sloane, D. M., Cimiotti, J. P., Riman, K. A., & McHugh, M. D. (2022). Hospital nurse staffing and sepsis protocol compliance and outcomes among patients with sepsis in the USA: a multistate cross-sectional analysis. *BMJ Open*, 12(3), e056802. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-056802>.

that care that we are trained to provide because we are stretched too thin by hospital management. It is devastating.

HCA's staffing cuts have particularly impacted the emergency department and the oncology department at our hospital, and labor and delivery departments in the other Mission hospitals.^{8,9,10} As a result of the Labor and Delivery department closures across the Mission hospital system, anyone who needs to deliver their baby has to travel to Asheville, a drive upwards of two hours for some rural communities.

With our union, nurses began to blow the whistle on the dangerous working conditions at Mission and to report the many actions HCA Healthcare had taken to reduce essential services. On December 14, 2023, North Carolina's Attorney General Josh Stein filed a lawsuit against HCA Healthcare for violating its contractual agreement to maintain essential services effectively at the same levels.¹¹ Our reports to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the legal action by Attorney General Stein led to a Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) investigation that resulted in CMS issuing HCA Healthcare a notice on February 6th, 2024, that Mission hospital was in "immediate jeopardy" related to deficiencies in care, which posed a risk to patients' health and safety. HCA was given twenty-four days to rectify those issues or lose federal funding.¹²

HCA Healthcare has since been removed from immediate jeopardy status after announcing "a plan of correction" to address issues. That plan was developed without the input of Mission's health care workers and fails to address the severe understaffing throughout the hospital.

My experiences at Mission Hospital are just one example of how HCA Healthcare, the largest for-profit hospital system in the world, harms patients and workers by prioritizing its profits at the expense of people. HCA-owned hospitals across the country are being stripped of staff and essential services like labor and delivery units, nurseries, behavioral health, and trauma centers are being closed, leaving vulnerable communities without access to critical health services. In Live Oak, Florida, HCA Healthcare bought two hospitals just to close them down and turn them into urgent care centers,¹³ and similarly, HCA purchased Cypress Fairbanks Medical Center in the suburbs of Houston, Texas, only to lay off nearly 600 workers and convert the building into a free-standing emergency center.¹⁴ From trauma and stroke centers in San Jose, California,¹⁵ to

⁸ NC Health News. "Mountain Maternity Wards Closing, WNC Women's Lives on the Line." Published Sept. 29, 2017. Accessed Apr. 1, 2024. Available at Mountain Maternity Wards Closing, WNC Women's Lives on the Line

⁹ ABC News. "Mission Health votes to close Blue Ridge Hospital's labor and delivery department." Published Jun. 5, 2017. Accessed Apr. 1, 2024. Available at <https://wlos.com/news/local/protesters-rally-to-save-labor-and-delivery-at-blue-ridge-hospital>

¹⁰ The Transylvania Times. "Hospital Closing Birthing Unit - Brevard NC." Published Feb. 4, 2015. Accessed Apr. 1, 2024. Available at https://www.transylvaniatimes.com/news/hospital-closing-birthing-unit---brevard-nc/article_2725dc6c-9c83-5e0e-9a6c-f33ee3f2e144.html

¹¹ Stein v. HCA Management Services, (North Carolina Superior Court). <https://ncdoj.sharefile.com/share/view/s7aa4a4b30bc34a168b691be7b053f932>

¹² NC health News. "Feds cite Asheville's Mission Hospital for 'immediate jeopardy,' HCA division president tells staff." Published Feb. 6, 2024. Available at: <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2024/02/06/feds-cite-ashevelles-mission-hospital-for-immediate-jeopardy-hca-division-president-tells-staff/>

¹³ First Coast ABC News. "Hospitals in Live Oak, Starke shutting down inpatient, non-emergency services." Feb. 28, 2020. Accessed Mar. 31, 2024. <https://www.firstcoastnews.com/article/news/local/hospitals-in-live-oak-starke-shutting-down-inpatient-non-emergency-services/77-8a96fbd4-0bf2-4a5d-93db-1a5908e6461a>

¹⁴ Houston Chronicle. "Hundreds laid off or reassigned as Cypress Fairbanks Med Center converts to free-standing ER." Mar. 28, 2019. Accessed Mar. 31, 2024. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/business/article/Hundreds-laid-off-or-reassigned-as-Cypress-13722031.php>

¹⁵ National Nurses United. Press Release, "RN's rally to demand HCA maintain life-saving trauma, stroke, and heart attack services at Regional Medical Center." March 25, 2024. Available at: <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/press/rmc-rns-rally-to-demand-hca-maintain-life-saving-trauma-stroke-and-heart-attack-services>

nurseries that serve a large number of high-risk patients in Osceola, Florida,¹⁶ and more,¹⁷ HCA is attempting to shutdown lifelines for our communities.

And it is not just HCA that is prioritizing profits over patients. This is a national problem with countless hospital systems actively harming communities by closing critical hospitals and hospital units.

Hospital consolidation has skyrocketed over the past two decades. More than 67 percent of hospitals belong to a larger system, compared to just 45 percent of hospitals in 2000.¹⁸ We have seen large health care corporations and their private equity investors buy up local community hospitals across the country, drastically reducing the number of public community hospitals operating today.

There has been a dangerous trend in which profit-driven health care corporations have reduced services, cut staffing levels, refuse to purchase essential medical supplies and equipment, closed departments or units within a hospital, or have fully closed hospitals in critical access areas, leaving patients, the community, and workers to deal with the consequences. These health care disruptions often follow decisions to sell the hospital's physical property and other assets to the highest bidder and pleas to the federal or state governments for financial assistance, citing that a critical access hospital is in financial distress.

Hospital corporations consistently make these decisions because their main goal is to cut costs to maximize revenue for hospital executives and investors, without regard for the impact on the quality of care patients in the community receive. Numerous studies have found highly consolidated health care markets lead to an increase in prices and worse patient care outcomes. The elimination of obstetric services, the branch of medicine that provides care during pregnancy and childbirth, has emerged as a major casualty of hospitals in highly concentrated markets that want to cut costs.¹⁹

For example, Ascension, one of the nation's largest Catholic, nonprofit health care systems with 140 hospitals in nineteen states, is using its market dominance to shut down its labor and delivery units, forcing patients to travel further for obstetrics care.²⁰ A report released by National Nurses United in January 2024 showed that Ascension is closing obstetrics services at higher rates than the national average and that closures are disproportionately in Black and Latine communities, counties with higher infant mortality rates than the national average, and in low-income neighborhoods reliant on Medicaid.²¹ Ascension also has a partnership worth approximately \$1 billion with Towerbrook Partners, a private equity firm.²²

¹⁶ National Nurses United. National Nurse Magazine, Oct, Nov, Dec 2022 Issue. "RN's at HCA Florida Osceola Hospital protest shutdown." Available at: <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/article/nurses-condemn-closure-of-nursery-unit>

¹⁷ National Nurses United. Press Release, "Trinity nurses to hold press conference condemning behavioral health unit shutdown." Available at: <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/press/trinity-nurses-to-hold-press-conference-condemning-behavioral-health-unit-shutdown>

¹⁸ National Nurses United Report, "Dangerous Descent: How Ascension Betrays its Mission by Gutting Care for Pregnant Patients and Babies." January 2024. Available at:

https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/sites/default/files/nnu/documents/1223_AscensionSeton_Obstetrics_DangerousDescent_Report.pdf

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Obstetrics refers to a wide range of units and services for pregnant patients, while labor and delivery refers to a patient in labor and who gives birth. We use obstetrics and labor and delivery interchangeably in this report.

²¹ National Nurses United Report, "Dangerous Descent: How Ascension Betrays its Mission by Gutting Care for Pregnant Patients and Babies." January 2024. Available at:

https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/sites/default/files/nnu/documents/1223_AscensionSeton_Obstetrics_DangerousDescent_Report.pdf

²² Ibid.

In southern California, union nurses at Hazel Hawkins Memorial Hospital have been fighting the hospital's attempts to close its intensive care unit and claim bankruptcy, despite the fact that the hospital's own financial reports show them to be in a strong financial position.²³ Union nurses in the California Nurses Association worked tirelessly to alert their community to the false claims Hazel Hawkins management was presenting before the bankruptcy courts. On March 21, 2024, the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for Northern California District of California agreed with nurses and dismissed the case.²⁴

Across the country, nurses have been taking collective action through their unions, both at the bargaining table and through legislative advocacy, to improve staffing levels in their hospitals and prevent reduction of services or hospital closures. But we should not have to spend this amount of time and energy fighting greedy health care organizations to provide the care our community needs.

Our profit-driven health care system is deeply broken, and it endangers patients and health care workers. It prioritizes short-term financial returns rather than long-term investments in our health. Health care should not be a business; it is a human right. The resulting problems can only be addressed by removing the profit motive from health care. That is why nurses across this country support a single-payer Medicare for All system that will transform our profit-driven health care system into a health care system that prioritizes patient care and, by extension, the nursing profession.

On behalf of the 225,000 registered nurses represented by National Nurses United, we look forward to working with your subcommittee to improve patient care, protect the health and safety of nurses, improve staffing levels and nurse retention, and build a sustainable public health care system for all. Congress must take action to reign in profit-driven hospital corporations and private equity investors. Doing so is critical to improve hospital working conditions and the quality of patient care across the country.

²³ National Nurses United. Press Release, "*Hazel Hawkins nurses to host town hall meeting following hospital's bankruptcy filing and RNs no confidence vote in the health district.*" Available at: <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/press/hazel-hawkins-nurses-host-town-hall-meeting-following-hospitals-bankruptcy-filing>

²⁴ National Nurses United. Press Release, "*Registered nurses are deeply gratified after court dismisses Hazel Hawkins bankruptcy claim.*" Available at: <https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/press/rns-are-deeply-gratified-after-court-dismisses-hazel-hawkins-bankruptcy-claim>

ATTACHMENTS

1. National Nurses United Report, "Dangerous Descent: How Ascension Betrays its Mission by Gutting Care for Pregnant Patients and Babies." January 2024. Available at: https://www.nationalnursesunited.org/sites/default/files/nnu/documents/1223_AscensionSeton_Obstetrics_DangerousDescent_Report.pdf
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