

October 19, 2001

SCHAKOWSKY PRAISES NURSES AND FRONTLINE HEALTHCARE WORKERS DURING SEIU RALLY

"IT'S TIME TO STAND FOR PATIENTS"

CHICAGO, IL -- I am proud to be here today to stand up for patients by standing with the dedicated health professionals who care for them.

We are all concerned these days about safety. After the tragic events of September 11, we are more aware than ever that we need nurses and other frontline health care workers to take care of us. Whatever the emergency and whatever the medical problem, patients want to know that there are dedicated and trained health care workers available to meet our needs.

But we must act now to make sure that health care workers will be there whenever we need them. We must wake up to the problems in our health care system and solve them today. Tomorrow may be too late.

We cannot expect nurses to work if they are not treated with dignity and respect.

We cannot expect nurses to work if they are forced into mandatory overtime. No worker should be told that their job comes before their family - that they have to work an extra shift instead of being with their children. Extra hours also mean extra physical demands and more stress for already overworked nurses - threatening patient care.

We cannot expect nurses to work if they are told to keep silent when they see patient care being threatened or if they are punished for blowing the whistle on quality problems.

And we cannot expect nurses to work if they are being asked to care for so many patients that they know care is being compromised.

We need to attract new people into nursing and health care. But we cannot ignore the fact that too many good people are leaving nursing because they are not allowed to do their jobs and protect their patients.

The Harvard School of Public Health reports that there are about half a million licensed nurses who are not practicing today. In Illinois, nearly 1 in 5 licensed nurses have chosen to work outside of nursing. We need to bring those nurses back into the profession and keep other nurses from leaving. That is why the Health Care Accountability Act is so critical and why it must be enacted now.

On the federal level, we are also working to protect patients.

Next week, I will join Representative Stark and other members in introducing the Safe Nursing and Patient Care Act of 2001, to limit mandatory overtime.

We continue to push for whistleblower protections - included in the patients' bill of rights - for nurses and other health care workers who report problems.

We are also pushing for staffing ratios. I will shortly reintroduce the Quality Care for Nursing Home Patients Act, along with Representatives Blagojevich and Rush, to require safe staffing requirements for nursing homes. Your staff has been instrumental in developing that bill.

SEIU has been a leader in developing and pushing for every one of these initiatives. Patients rely on you not just for care but to speak out on their behalf when care is being compromised. You are doing your job and, as a member of Congress, I know that it is my job to stand with you.

I am proud to be a partner with you in fighting to improve patient care. Together, we will win.