

## **Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing**

### **"Will the Bush Administration's Overtime Proposals Mean Less Pay and Longer Hours for American Workers?"**

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Thank you, Senator Dorgan.

My name is Cathy Stoddart, and I am a registered nurse at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh. I'm sure you've all heard about the nursing shortage in this country. A lot has been written about it – in Pennsylvania, where I work, one out of every four nurses is leaving the profession.

But instead of improving the conditions that are driving nurses away, many hospitals are making it worse – by requiring nurses to work overtime – 12, 16, even 20 hours straight.

There have been countless studies demonstrating the result of these policies – working too many hours while caring for too many patients leads to increased patient injuries and deaths.

But nurses like me don't have to read those studies to know that. We live it. By about halfway through a double shift, we are exhausted. But instead of taking our break time to catch our breath or eat lunch, we spend our free moments touching base with our fellow nurses, double checking the doses of medication we have administered, verifying that in our fatigue we haven't made a mistake that could harm a patient.

It's no wonder so many of us are leaving.

And now, President Bush and the Republican members of the House and Senate are trying to take away the one thing that discouraged hospital administrators from forcing nurses to work overtime. If you think nurses are running away now, just wait until their employers start telling them they have to work a 20 hour shift and aren't getting overtime pay for a single minute of it!

In addition to being a registered nurse, I am also a registered Republican, and have been active for years in the Republican Party in my home state of Ohio.

Several weeks ago, I wrote a letter to President Bush about his efforts to take overtime pay away from nurses like me. I'd like to read you some of that letter:

"Nurses have a demanding and challenging task, as patients are sicker – because they

cannot afford to come to the hospital when they should and we are expected to do more with less resources, faster and longer, and with complete accuracy.

"These working conditions, which include forced overtime for which nurses currently GET PAID, are driving nurses out of the profession.

"There is a nursing crisis right now, with licensed nurses sitting home rather than work under conditions where they cannot fully meet the needs of their patients.

"Nurses are currently paid overtime pay for FORCED overtime. But they are still leaving nursing in record numbers, the new nurses and the experienced nurses, due to the working conditions.

"The Republican members of the House and Senate – under your direction and pressure – changed the overtime pay laws so that now nurses (and the rest of middle class working America) can be FORCED to work overtime and not be compensated by their employer with overtime pay.

"You propose that my homeland security and civil defense is a priority, but you have set this country on the path of a NATIONAL HEALTH CARE CRISIS.

"That means patients in this country are left unprotected by YOU unless they go to a hospital that respects its workers and the patients they care for. A hospital that pays for overtime, and has a ban on mandatory overtime and safe working conditions so that patients can have the highest quality of care that they deserve.

"Health care workers have been protecting this country one patient at a time, returning them to health so that they can make a contribution to society. Now it looks like we must do it one seat at a time, by removing you and those who support you, and returning this country to health so that we as a country can make a contribution to our world society."

I want to leave you with one last thought, which occurred to me as I was riding the bus in Pittsburgh the other day, doing some Christmas shopping.

As I was sitting there on the bus, I realized that if this law goes into effect, the bus driver who was driving that bus around would still get his overtime pay if he worked extra hours. And he should – good for him.

But there will be no overtime pay for nurses.

And when a nurse is working in her twentieth hour, something the bus driver will never have to do as there are laws that set safe limits of operation for him, I'll be setting up an IV drip that can save – or take – a life.

I urge you to continue all your efforts to prevent this disastrous regulation from going into effect  
– if for no other reason than someday, you or someone you love may be at the end of that IV drip.