



IRI ALERT

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The unions' use of COVID-19: What to look for and how to respond

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is top of mind for many organizations around the world but none more so than those in the healthcare industry. Hospitals and healthcare workers are on the front lines, not only treating patients, but taking measures to combat the spread of the virus to others – including themselves. Unfortunately, several unions have chosen to use COVID-19 to attack hospitals and further their own agendas, distracting those in the industry from their primary responsibilities of caring for patients and ushering communities through a public health crisis.

Union Attacks

The Michigan Nurses Association is exploiting nurse anxiety over COVID-19 as a prospecting tactic for organizing by [using flyers](#) and [its website](#) to host and promote “education” sessions on the subject. This is not the first time they’ve done this. As we have seen with previous outbreaks like Ebola, SARS and the Zika virus, these sessions are used to gather personal information and feedback about participants’ working conditions, which are then used to criticize the preparedness of healthcare providers.

The California Nurses Union and National Nurses United (CNA/NNU) [are active on this issue, as well](#). Last week, the group sent a [survey to membership](#) inquiring about their employers’ preparedness and held a press conference [publicizing the results](#) and criticizing healthcare employers for failing to protect nurses. Multiple national media outlets, including [Modern Healthcare](#), [The New York Times](#) and [Reuters](#) have referred to CNA/NNU’s survey in recent articles.

Additionally, CNA/NNU have sent letters to the Centers for Disease Control asking it to strengthen its guidelines on COVID-19, and to the California Department of Public Health, Cal-OSHA, and the World Health Organization outlining its concerns and recommendations for handling the issue that includes a [Personal Protective Equipment report](#).

There have also been a number of recent media stories with CNA specifically criticizing UC Davis Medical Center for its treatment of the virus. In fact, CNA nurses at San Joaquin General Hospital in French Camp, California [went on strike for two days](#) (March 5-6) noting that the county was irresponsible for not finalizing a contract agreement with them when “bedside nurses are critically needed to address the coronavirus crisis.”

What Your Organization Should Do

ACT! Most healthcare organizations have likely already addressed these issues with staff and will continue to do so, but if your organization hasn't -- don't wait another minute. The longer your organization waits, the more vulnerable it is. As mentioned above, these are not new tactics. Communication is key to not only halting the spread of the virus but also the spread of misinformation.

- If you haven't already, examine and update relevant policies related to employees, patients, visitors, students, volunteers, vendors and others who have access to your facilities.
- Communicate to your employees and patients clearly and consistently. Make sure they know exactly what steps you are taking to adhere to all necessary protocols and ensure your facilities remain a safe place to give and receive care.
- Develop clear guidelines on how you will handle employees and others in your hospitals who have traveled to areas where they may have been exposed, including if/how they can use paid leave, short term disability or other benefits programs if they need to be quarantined.
- Discuss with legal counsel whether caregivers' refusal to come to work due to a belief that their employer's policies do not provide safe working conditions would be considered protected concerted activity under the National Labor Relations Act.
- Expand existing digital and traditional media monitoring efforts so you are aware of any union efforts targeting your communities or employees and develop an escalation plan to respond accordingly.

Have questions about how to proceed?

Contact IRI at (313) 965-0350 for more information.