

Southern Worker Justice

Newsletter of the Southern Worker Justice Campaign- Mental Health DHHS Council southernworkerjustice.org

Worker Political Action Pushes for \$20/hr and Safe Staffing at Legislature!



On April 19, State and local government workers converged on the State Legislature as part of the annual SWJC Political Action Day. Workers met with Legislators to discuss the deep understaffing in state facilities and how to work together to pass a budget for Fiscal Year 2024 that supports quality jobs and quality services.

SWJC members demanded that the state invest its huge revenue surplus (projected to be around \$3.25 billion) into significant pay raises for state workers this year to help retain staff.

State employees are working incredibly understaffed, with some units in the Department of Health and Human Services already closing down completely, while others are operating with over 50% vacancies rates. Overall, there are over 3,700 (out of 11,000) positions vacant in DHHS State Operated Healthcare Facilities. Overall state government workers are continuing to come to work every day and provide essential services to our residents, even

though overall there is a 23% vacancy rate. Housekeepers and others in the UNC System also face similar vacancies rates and are being stretched beyond their capacity.

“The Alzheimer unit at my facility was closed down due to not having enough staff working. We need help. CNA’s are leaving us because agency staff are being paid twice as much as those who stayed and worked through the pandemic. We are not being appreciated,” stated **Patrice Jacobs**, Chair person of SWJC DHHS Council and President of Longleaf Center SWJC chapter in Wilson, NC.

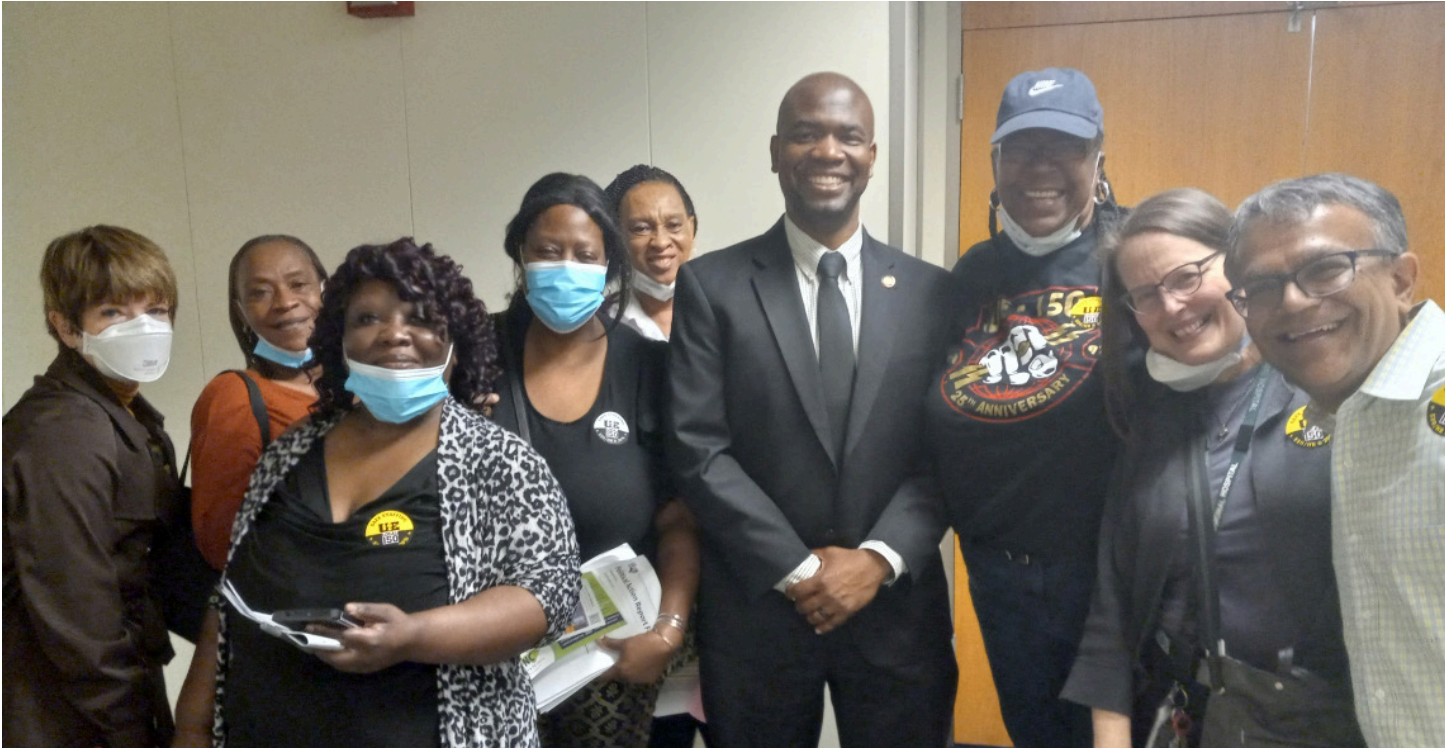
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★ **DHHS Workers Say “They Punish Our Loyalty” at Town Hall**

★ **Workers Meets with DHHS**

Political Action Day (continued from page 1)



Pictured above: SWJC members meet with Representative Allen Buansi (Orange Co/Higher Ed Committee). (From Left) Ann Forsthoefel (CRH), Peggy Price (Caswell), Natasha Battle (Longleaf), Patrice Jacobs (Longleaf), Cary Lee (Murdoch), Rep. Buansi, Phyllis Jones (Murdoch), Wendy Eds (CRH) and Dr. Rakesh Patel (CRH).

“Despite the growing need for inpatient psychiatric care, a quarter of the psychiatric beds remain empty secondary to front line staff vacancies,” stated **Dr. Rakesh Patel**, President of the Butner chapter of SWJC at Central Regional Hospital in DHHS. Patel continued, “the state is unable to hire nurses, because of their refusal to offer competitive wages. Everyday, committed state workers leave. They are no longer willing to tolerate unsafe working conditions and hospital management’s lack of accountability.”

Recently over 2,400 housekeepers, campus workers and students across the UNC System signed a petition calling on the State to raise the minimum wage for housekeepers and other state employees to \$20 per hour, while also ending the practice of paying parking fees while at work.

Workers demand that the State Legislature pass a budget that includes:

- Raise minimum wage for state employees to \$20 per hour,
- 20% raise for other state employees over two years,
- 7-year Step Pay Plan for all state employees,
- A Safe Staffing Task Force,
- Repeal the ban on public sector collective bargaining,
- Making the wealthy and corporations pay fair share of taxes,
- No paying to park or student fees for university workers,
- \$11,000 per semester minimum stipend for UNC System graduate workers,
- Pass a Civil Service Board for city workers, and
- Meet-and-confer with workers at state facilities and universities.

“You Punish Our Loyalty”, SWJC President Confronts DHHS & Lawmakers During Town Hall

Fully acknowledging the mental health crisis in our state and the severe understaffing in state facilities, the State Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has been hosting a series of Town Hall forums to hear from the community. SWJC members have been attending these events all across the state to raise up our demands for safe staffing.

On February 9, at the DHHS Town Hall in Greenville, SWJC President **Sekia Royall**, along with Cherry Hospital member **Martha Brown**, spoke out about the concerns of DHHS workers.

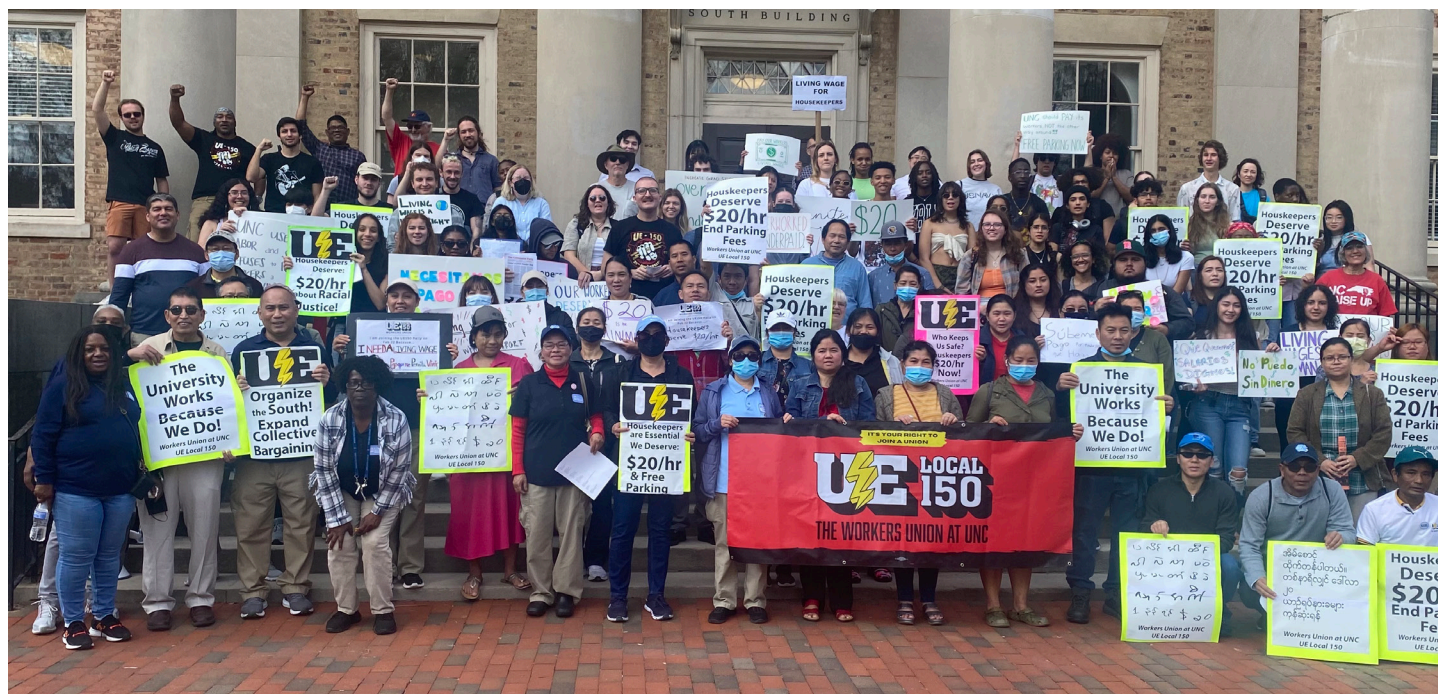
On the stage was Kody H. Kinsley, Secretary, NC-DHHS, John Bell, NC House Majority Leader, NC State Representative, R-District 10, Jim Burgin, NC State Senator, R-District 12, Kandie Smith, NC State Senator, D-District 5, Gloristine Brown, NC State Representative, D-District 8, and Timothy Reeder, NC State Representative, R-District 9, all from nearby districts.

Sekia stated, “State Operated DHHS mental health facilities are in a dire understaffing crisis. Some



Sekia Royall speaks at DHHS Town Hall in Greenville on February 9, 2023.

facilities are closing entire units, we are caring for hundreds less patients than our capacity. Front line healthcare positions are vacant in huge rates 30-50%. Contract staff are being paid three times more than state employees. Many feel you are punishing our loyalty. We need urgent significant pay increases and changes in management.”



On February 22, over 150 housekeepers at UNC Chapel Hill and their supporters rallied (again) demanding that the state raise their wages up to \$20 per hour and end practice of making

them pay to park at work.

Housekeepers at UNC have been organizing since last fall, including delivering a petition with over 2,400 signatures.

Political Action Update!

Since the State Legislature convened into session in January, SWJC rank-n-file members have been busy meeting with State elected officials.

Members of the SWJC DHHS Council, which is composed of state mental health workers in the Department of Health and Human Services, have continued to reach out to members of the Health and Human Services Joint Legislative Oversight Committee to push our safe staffing recommendations, including:

- 1. 10% Retention bonuses made permanent** and granted to all front line positions.
- 2. Return to pre-pandemic minimum staffing ratios** and staffing for acuity to meet the needs of the patients on the units. Unit minimums to be published openly.
- 3. Shift differential pay** for all staff including food service and housekeeping.
- 4. Facility directors should establish regular meet-n-confer sessions** with SWJC leadership at each facility, and sincerely respond to suggested changes.
- 5. Establishment of a Safe Staffing Task Force** to investigate the root causes of employee turn-over and expedite filling staff vacancies.
- 6. In-range salary adjustments and establish a 7-year step plan,** similar to what was done for prison guards in last year's budget.

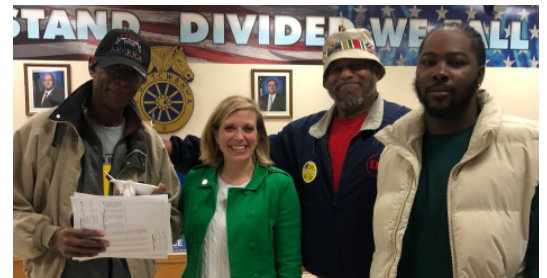
On February 25th, SWJC members attended a Legislative breakfast organized by the NC State AFL-CIO in Raleigh. SWJC members had attended a similar breakfast in Charlotte the week before. **Charlie Daniels** (NC DOT), **Angaza Laughinghouse** (Capital Area), **Jonathan Fortune** (Raleigh City), **Rakesh Patel** (Central Regional Hospital), **Willis Johnson** (retired activist NC DOT) and new NCSU chapt. member Benjamin Pulgar-Guzman all participated in the Raleigh Legislative breakfast. Brother Angaza Laughinghouse spoke to the 120 unionists and challenged all 14 legislators present to support the repeal of NC General Statute section 95-98, the public sector workers ban on the fundamental human right to collectively bargain, raise university housekeepers minimum wage of \$20 per hour, increase DHHS Hospital staffing, grant Cost of Living increase of 10% for all state workers, and increase the taxes on "big corporations and wealthy class" to pay a fair share.

On January 23, SWJC Council leaders **Rakesh Patel** (CRH), **Dave Bartholemew** (Broughton Hospital) and **Martha Brown** (Cherry Hospital) met with **Senator Natalie Murdock**, who sits on the HHS Oversight committee to discuss safe staffing recommendations. Sen. Murdock agreed to attempt to visit CRH to see the conditions herself. Members also met with **Senator Mike Woodard** on February 9 stressing the same concerns about understaffing. Also in February, DHHS members Rakesh Patel and **Buba Subally** met with **Rep. Mark Pless and Senator Mary Wills Bode**.

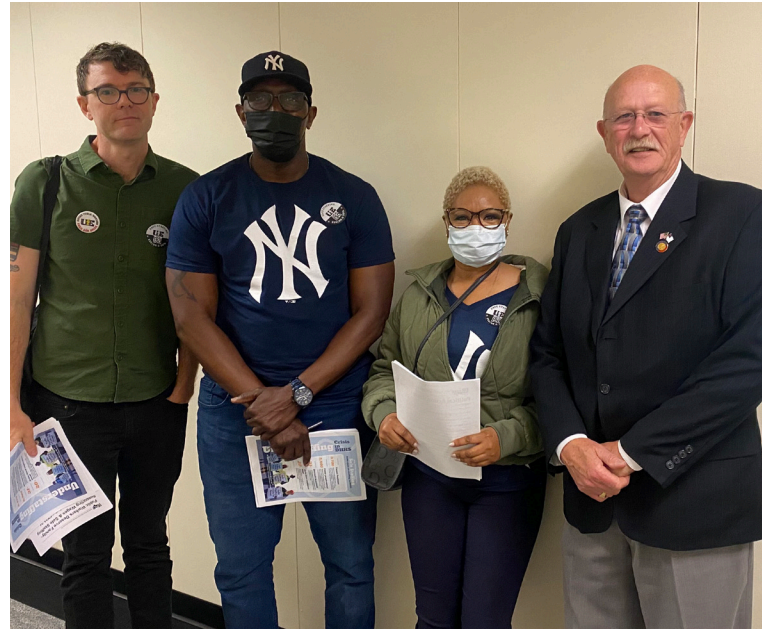
Members also met with **Rep. Amos Quick** (Guilford County) and **Rep. Vernetta Alston** (Durham) to discuss the prospects of amending the City of Greensboro and Durham's Charter to allow for Civil Service Board job protections.



Rakesh Patel, Dave Bartholemew and Martha Brown and UE IR Dante Strobino meet with Senator Natalie Murdock on January 23.



Charlie Daniels, Angaza Laughinghouse and Jonathan Fortune meet with State Representative (Wake County) Sara Crawford



(Pictured above left): SWJC member Phyllis Jones, Cary Lee and Rakesh Patel with Rep. Ya Liu.

(Picture above right): UEREF Int'l Rep Dante Strobino, Mike Addison and Francine Harvey with Rep. Bill Ward



DHHS Worker Council Meets with Sec. Kody Kinsley, Deputy Sec. Mark Benton, DSOHF Director Karen Burkes

On April 19, DHHS Worker Council leaders met with DHHS administration including William Young (Cherry, Chapter President), Shiela Ward (Cherry), Peggy Briggins-Price (Caswell Center, Chapter President, DHHS Council Co-chair), Patrice Jacobs (Longleaf Center chapter President, DHHS Council Chair), Natasha Battle (Longleaf Center, Chapter Recording Secretary), Michael Addison (Caswell Center), Francine Harvey (Caswell Center, chapter Financial Secretary), Phyllis Jones, Cary Lee (Murdoch Center), Dr. Rakesh Patel (CRH, Butner Chapter President)

Workers raised up demands about the need for increased wages to \$20 per hour, safe staffing, an end to sexual harassment and reigning in abusive management. Many talked about concerns with vacancies being filled with contract staff.

“Work to keep your own staff,” stated **Peggy Briggins-Price**. “You have leadership and management that pushes our own staff out, just to bring in new contractors that don’t know anything. I ask that you would come to our facility and not seek out management, but seek out us workers.” In the end they agreed to do so.

As Understaffing Crisis Across DHHS Continues to Worsen, Workers Organize for “Safe Staffing”

The chronic understaffing at state mental health facilities continues to get worse. Last week the legislature’s nonpartisan fiscal research division told lawmakers that right now, close to 3,700 positions are vacant — slightly more than triple the 1,230 vacancies reported in 2020. SWJC has been reporting for months that some units have entirely closed, while others remain 50-60% understaffed, causing tremendous stress on workers, and leading to increases injuries and burn out.

“We’ve seen a decrease in the number of people served, looking at last year compared to two years ago,” said Luke McDonald, from the legislature’s fiscal research division. “Across all the facilities [that] adds up to over 2,400 fewer people served, so a 31 percent decrease.”

For example, the state’s three psychiatric hospitals have a capacity of 894 beds, but they were only able to serve, on average, a total of 667 patients. The state’s three Alcohol and Drug Abuse Treatment Centers, if fully staffed, would have enough space for 146 patients every day, but they were only able to serve 80 patients per day, on average, throughout 2022.

Meanwhile, the SWJC campaign for Safe Staffing continues to push forward for accountability. On March 2, **Patrice Jacobs**, SWJC Longleaf Chapter President and DHHS Council Co-Chair spoke out at a Town Hall Forum organized by DHHS in New Bern. Present on the panel was **Senator Jim Burgin**, **DHHS Secretary Kody Kinsley** and **DHHS Deputy Secretary Mark Benton**.

“We are still suffering with COVID in our facilities. At Longleaf it is really bad. We had a whole unit down sick for almost three weeks” said Patrice to the panel. “Our safety is being threatened by understaffing. Our paychecks have not risen at the same rate as cost of living. We have requested a 7-Year Step Plan to properly raise our pay.”

SWJC had been meeting regularly with top DHHS officials during the pandemic, but throughout all of 2022, they refused to meet with our leaders. Recently, since the Town Hall we organized in September last year and all the media attention we have gained, they have been interested in meeting with us. At the Town Hall in New Bern, after our pressure again, Deputy Sec. Benton and Sec. Kinsley did commit to meeting with our union leaders again soon to hear our recommendations for safe staffing.



Patrice Jacobs speaks at DHHS Town Hall forum in New Bern, March 2, 2023



SWJC members Patrice Jacobs, DaNisha Rogers and Lora Tate talk with DHHS Sec. Kody Kinsley after DHHS Town Hall forum in New Bern, March 2, 2023

Facility Type	Change in # Served	% Change
Psychiatric Hospitals	-700	-32%
ADATCs	-1,447	-36%
Developmental Centers	-158	-15%
Neuro-Medical Treatment Centers	-126	-23%
Residential Programs for Children	-18	-27%