

# Speak Out Now in Healthcare

*A workplace newsletter for Highland and Kaiser workers*

August 28th, 2024

## Lead in the Water of Our Oakland Schools

In the last few weeks, parents and staff at Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) have received concerning emails about the levels of lead in the water at their children's public and charter schools. Lead poisoning in children can lead to learning disabilities, impaired hearing, blood disorders, and behavioral problems.

On Monday, August 19, teachers and staff across the district entered their classrooms and hallways to find plastic bags over water fixtures and the water turned off. Only after pressing administration did staff receive emails explaining that faulty fixtures were taken out of service and that it may take weeks to install new filters or replace fixtures and piping. The district claims that all OUSD schools will be tested in the coming months. Until then, students and staff are left with a limited water supply.

OUSD has provided FloWater dispensers at each campus and expects families to send refillable water bottles with their children. However, one dispenser per school isn't enough. Our students shouldn't have to waste class time trekking across campus for safe water. Oakland communities must continue to organize among themselves and demand safe schools and water now - it's what our kids deserve.



## State Supreme Court Rules Against Alameda Health System Workers

In a unanimous ruling on August 15th, the California Supreme Court found that public healthcare workers are not protected by the same labor laws as employees of private healthcare systems. The case (Stone vs Alameda Health System) goes back to 2011 and involved a nurse and a medical assistant at Highland Hospital who said workers were being forced to miss their legally-mandated meal and rest breaks.

Rather than dispute their claim of missed breaks, the hospital lawyers found a work-around by arguing that public hospitals were exempt from these basic worker protections.

Ryan McGinley-Stempel, a lawyer for Alameda Health System, celebrated the ruling. He stated that if county hospitals were penalized for violating labor laws, it would, "jeopardize their ability to carry out their public missions."

Since when does providing public services give hospitals a free pass to violate labor laws? How are critical front-line healthcare workers supposed to care for patients without breaks for rest and meals?

Fortunately, our current union contract supercedes this ruling and protects our rights to breaks - for now. But this just shows us how crazy it is that our basic rights as workers are not formalized into labor law. Instead they're up for negotiation every time we fight for a new contract.

## Kaiser's Allergy to Staffing

Is Kaiser allergic to being fully staffed? Because often when an employee leaves, the position never gets reposted. So departments run on skeleton crews, with overworked and burned out staff who are one crisis away from being the next employee to leave.

Even when we are "fully staffed" we can feel the push to do more with less, but when we are down multiple positions or have zero on-call staff to relieve people when they take the time off they are entitled to, the work day feels absolutely brutal.

And why? So the bosses' spreadsheets can look good? Since management cannot technically eliminate positions, they will continue to "freeze" and not post them, because they serve the bottom line. But we serve our patients, and we deserve better.

