

*U.S. nurses' union warns of
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Washington, November 24 (RHC)-- Nurses from the profession's largest union in the United States have warned of dire stresses on the healthcare system as the country sees a new surge in COVID-19 cases and hospitalisations.

In a news conference on Monday, members of the National Nurses United, which represents 170,000 registered nurses across the US, detailed harrowing accounts of hospital understaffing, a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and an inadequate response from local and federal authorities.

Over the weekend, the United States surpassed 12 million confirmed coronavirus cases. More than 247,000 people have died in the country after contracting COVID-19, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally.

Despite a lull in hospitalisations in the middle of the year, the numbers of patients currently hospitalised has more than doubled as the US enters its colder months. As of Friday, more than 83,000 patients in the U.S. were hospitalised with COVID-19, according to the COVID Tracking Project.

Officials in some areas have warned hospitals could face stresses worse than they did during the first major outbreak earlier in the year. Data from the Health and Human Services Department released last week showed that 18 percent of hospitals across all 50 states, Washington, DC and Puerto Rico report being “critically” short on staff. North Dakota is the worst hit, with 51 percent of hospitals reporting shortages. Seven other states are above the 30 percent mark.

“Nearly one year into this pandemic, our hospitals are still not prepared,” said Jean Ross, the president of the union and a registered nurse in Minnesota. She said a survey of nurses conducted by the organisation found that 80 percent of hospitals in the US have not done adequate planning for a surge in cases.

“Our government and healthcare employers have not implemented what is needed since the pandemic started,” she said. “We are still fighting for safe staffing and optimal PPE”, as well as proper “infection control” measures.

Marissa Lee, a labor and delivery nurse in Kissimmee, Florida, said most nurses at the hospital where she works, the Osceola Regional Medical Center, only receive optimal PPE that provides “airborne and droplet precaution” when they are working directly with patients who are known to be infected with COVID-19. Otherwise, she said, they receive less protective surgical masks.

“We need PPE ... PPE is the key word to everything we’re speaking about here,” said Lee, who added that staffing levels have become “unsafe” with personnel regularly shifted to departments outside of their expertise. The hospital administration did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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