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Hospital Violence Task Force Makes Progress on Protecting Health Care Workers

San Diego regional effort expands membership under leadership of DA and Scripps CEO

SAN DIEGO – The newly formed San Diego Hospital Workforce Violence Task Force is making progress after being established only a few months ago by mapping out a number of goals aimed at preventing, addressing and prosecuting crimes involving violence against the doctors, nurses and others who care for patients in San Diego County. The task force was formed in response to the emerging, urgent issue of increased violence against health care workers.

The task force also has expanded its membership under the leadership of Scripps Health President and CEO Chris Van Gorder, who initiated the creation of the group, along with San Diego County District Attorney Summer Stephan.

“Without safety, nothing thrives,” DA Stephan said. “Reducing the threats and violence and preventing potential crimes that put health care workers in danger is critical to making our health system the best that it can be. This task force is already a positive step in that direction.”

Task force members include Scripps Health, the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office, the Office of the San Diego City Attorney, Sharp Healthcare, UC San Diego Health, Rady Children’s Hospital, Kaiser Permanente San Diego, Paradise Valley Hospital, Palomar Health, Tri-City Medical Center, the Hospital Association of San Diego and Imperial Counties, the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department, the San Diego Police Department, the Chula Vista Police

Department, the Carlsbad Police Department, the National City Police Department, the La Mesa Police Department, the Escondido Police Department, the Oceanside Police Department and the San Diego Harbor Police Department.

The San Diego County Police Chiefs' and Sheriff's Association also has committed to supporting the safety of health professionals through increased communication, training and enforcement.

So far, the task force's efforts to support health care workers and reduce the number of violent incidents have included:

- Establishing liaisons between hospitals and law enforcement agencies
- Arranging rounding (tours) through hospitals by law enforcement to increase their understanding of the environment where hospital staff members work
- Improving training for both hospital staff and law enforcement officers
- Developing a new tracking system for hospital workforce violence cases in order to better understand the volume and nature of these incidents
- Updating and coordinating policies and procedures related to hospital violence
- Discussing potential legislation and regulations that could help deter assaults in hospitals

Additionally, Scripps Health recently hired retired FBI cyber security special agent Todd Walbridge to help lead the effort at Scripps to enhance staff security and training through his role as corporate senior director of safety and security.

"Violence has been an unfortunate part of health care for a long time, but the problem is getting worse here in San Diego and across the country," Van Gorder said. "It's time to take a broader communitywide approach to reducing the demeaning comments, verbal abuse and assaults that we now see on a regular basis in many of our facilities."

Workplace violence at Scripps' five hospital campuses jumped by 31% during fiscal year 2023 as compared with the year before, reaching 2,335 total incidents. In fact, workplace violence incidents have been steadily rising at Scripps facilities for the past four years. And the worst kind of incident – assault – is rising astronomically, quadrupling in one year to 484 incidents in fiscal 2023.

Health care employees are five times more likely to experience workplace violence than are other workers, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. A 2022 poll conducted by the American College of Emergency Physicians among its members found that violence in hospital emergency departments increased by 24% between 2018 and 2022, a period that covered the explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Physicians, nurses and other health care employees need to be able to work in safe environments to deliver the best care possible to every patient they encounter," said Ghazala Sharieff, M.D., MBA, Scripps corporate senior vice president and chief medical and operations officer, acute care. "The rounding that has been done thus far by the task force at Scripps hospitals already is paying dividends by increasing understanding between law enforcement and hospital staff members while clarifying their respective roles, expectations of each other and plans for responding to emergencies."

ABOUT SCRIPPS HEALTH

Founded in 1924 by philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps, Scripps Health is a nonprofit integrated health care delivery system based in San Diego, Calif. Scripps treats more than 600,000 patients annually through the dedication of 3,000 affiliated physicians and more than 16,000 employees among its five acute-care hospital campuses, home health care services, 30 outpatient centers and clinics, and hundreds of affiliated physician offices throughout the region.

Recognized as a leader in disease and injury prevention, diagnosis and treatment, Scripps is also at the forefront of clinical research and is the only health system in the region with two level 1 trauma centers. With three highly respected graduate medical education programs, Scripps is a longstanding member of the Association of American Medical Colleges. Scripps has been ranked seven times as one of the nation's best health care systems by PINC AI, formerly known as Merative, IBM Watson Health and Truven Health Analytics. Its hospitals are consistently ranked by U.S. News & World Report among of the nation's best and Scripps is recognized by the Advisory Board, Fortune and Working Mother magazine as one of the best places in the nation to work. More information can be found at www.scripps.org.

ABOUT THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

The San Diego County DA's Office prosecutes all felony crimes in the county and misdemeanor crimes committed outside the City of San Diego. The office files about 40,000 criminal cases a year and balances prosecution with numerous crime prevention programs. District Attorney Summer Stephan leads the office of more than 1,000 dedicated employees who pursue fair and equal justice, and support victims daily across San Diego County.

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