
Subject: FW: Labor and Juneteenth resolution

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Dear Economic Development Committee Members,

I am writing in support of the labor and Juneteenth resolution, which I coauthored with Alders Latimer Burriss and Rummel.

In September, 2022, my union, UW Nurses United / SEIU Wisconsin, won the right regularly to discuss concerns and proposals with our administration. This historic agreement followed a three year long campaign for recognition, which culminated in a narrowly averted strike. What we won through this struggle was a seat at the table, a voice through which nurses could have some say over how things work at our hospital system. We fought for a voice because we want to ensure that our community has access to the world-class healthcare system it deserves.

The very first proposal that we made through this new arrangement with our employer was to make Juneteenth a paid holiday. This was a small ask, under the circumstances, but it carried tremendous symbolic weight. It was an attempt to pivot from conflict to collaboration with our administration. Here, we thought, was a proposal that all of us could get behind, where our values clearly overlapped with those of management. UW Health proudly declares its commitment to anti-racism, and we applaud its efforts, in the workplace and our community, to live up to this ideal. It donates to community organizations supporting racial justice, it educates its workforce to be anti-racist, and it embraced--in spirit, at least--the celebration of Juneteenth as a holiday by, among other things, raising a Juneteenth flag on its campus. When we proposed making Juneteenth a paid holiday, however, they balked. We pointed out that it would not disrupt access to health services, as clinics often remain open on paid holidays, but this did not change their minds.

We will not give up on this goal. Our union is committed to achieving racial justice, and we know that the goals of racial justice and worker justice are connected. This is especially true for us as a nurses union. As healthcare workers at the premiere hospital system in the state, we have a profound obligation to our patients and their families as well as to each other, as coworkers, to address structural racism in our community. We agree with the Dane County NAACP that healthcare organizations have an obligation to their communities to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in their workforces and the communities they serve. Making Juneteenth a paid holiday at UW Health would be an extraordinarily powerful step in that direction.

We celebrate our independence on July 4, and we celebrate our freedom on June 19. In 1776, Black Americans were not yet free, and the delay between the proclamation of Black freedom in 1863 and liberation in Texas more than two years later on June 19, 1865 is a powerful reminder that freedom in America is an incomplete project. Federal recognition for Juneteenth was an attempt to create this balance in the symbolic register of national holidays. For this historic injustice truly and fully to be addressed, employers that treat July 4 as a paid holiday must accord Juneteenth the same level of respect.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Colin Gillis

PS: Here is the recent NAACP editorial calling on UW Health to recognize Juneteenth as a paid holiday.
<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/naacp-dane-county-branch-calls-on-uw-health-to-honor-juneteenth-holiday-to-help-address-wisconsins-alarming-healthcare-disparities-301854136.html>