

Higher Education Healthcare Coalition

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MEDIA CONTACTS:

Nat Bender, Communications Director
American Federation of Teachers NJ
(908) 377-0393. nbender@aftnj.org

Cliff Freid, New Jersey Area Director
Committee of Interns and Residents/SEIU
(917) 687-2635. cfreid@cirseiu.org

Coalition advocates for planned public process rather than rushed merger

Calls for any process to move forward through legislation—not executive reorganization

Newark, N.J.— “We commend Senate and Assembly Higher Education committee members for initiating a process to plan any prospective merger publicly rather than behind closed doors,” said Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE) President Ann Twomey in a crowded public hearing discussing the Governor’s plan Tuesday. Unionized doctors, nurses, professors and staff members from the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) and Rutgers joined the call for a transparent process that puts community medical needs and education first, is fiscally responsible statewide and helps build on the existing strengths of Newark and Camden.

Newark Mayor Cory Booker questioned legislators about whether the merger as discussed would detract from critical medical care, vital community health clinics and economic impact on the city. Booker criticized the plan for not offering a bold vision of innovation in the UMDNJ system that takes advantage of the system’s strengths and instead positioning the Newark-based facilities as a second-tier institution needing to defend those assets.

Dr. Tony Tarchichi, Chief of Pediatric Medicine at UMDNJ, described University Hospital as a leading institution in spearheading programs to address minority physician recruitment and retention, as well as improving overall physician retention for the state. “There are already projections of a shortage of 1,000 primary care physicians and specialists by 2020,” said Dr. Tarchichi. “Under any reconfiguration of higher education in New Jersey, University Hospital must retain the ability to help address this critical need or we will all suffer the consequences.”

It is imperative that University Hospital’s future be spelled out now, according to John Gerow, President of Teamsters Local 97, which represents almost 4,000 clerical, technical and clinical workers at UMDNJ. “The outcome of a contract between Barnabas or any other private entity and the state to run University Hospital would affect all the rank and file staff workers as well as the future health care needs of residents who depend on the trauma center throughout Northern New Jersey, and particularly Newark”

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The Higher Education Healthcare Coalition (HEHC) is an umbrella group comprised of UMDNJ, Rutgers and Rowan labor organizations. The coalition’s mission is to ensure that any reorganization of healthcare education in New Jersey makes each of the institutions stronger and enhances the quality of higher education in New Jersey. The coalition maintains that any reorganization must protect the services currently provided, the skilled professionals who provide those services and the New Jersey communities that rely on these services.

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Dr. John Bogden, a professor at UMDNJ, spoke about the importance of UMDNJ's accreditations, and presented questions about how they would be protected. "How will we recruit and retain qualified faculty members in an environment of uncertainty and under our current financial constraints?" he asked. "How will we meet the financial requirements of accreditation when the Governor's Office has repeatedly stated that the implementation of the Advisory Committee recommendations will be cost-neutral? And how will removing University Hospital from the current UMDNJ and the proposed private-public partnership for University Hospital impact our academic, research and charity-care missions?" He suggested that these and other unanswered questions could threaten the accreditations of our academic programs and schools.

UMDNJ's American Association of University Professors (UMDNJ-AAUP) Executive Director Alex Bernstein said that the many unanswered questions and complex issues raised at the legislative hearing demonstrate why any implementation of the UMDNJ's Advisory Committee's recommendations must be achieved via the legislative process and not rushed into through an executive reorganization by the Governor. "There is too much at stake and a full vetting of all the academic, healthcare, financial, and labor issues with the involvement of all stakeholders is essential," said Bernstein.

Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 74 President Rick Pinto agreed with the call for an open and transparent legislative process and asked for a realistic timeline. "Giving July 1 as the deadline for implementation is unrealistic and will guarantee a closed process without the engagement of community stakeholders. Pinto questioned the impact of any proposed merger on public safety in and around UMDNJ's campuses. Fraternal Order of Police officers currently safeguard the campuses, but Pinto expressed concern that a merger could result in trained officers being replaced. "Is the state willing to pay for necessary police services or security? Would the understaffed City of Newark provide free police services and be able to perform addition functions such as coming to the Crisis Unit to restrain an unruly patient?"

Higher Education Healthcare Coalition unions, representing a majority of workers at the institutions which could be affected by any restructuring, are united around core principles of improving medical services and education while preserving and protecting vital community resources.

Communications Workers of America (CWA) 1031 Executive Vice President Kathleen Hernandez told the legislators that labor unions have continually requested to be included in any planning process, but have thus far been denied. "We hope today is the beginning of having answers to outstanding questions about labor contracts and bargaining units in any merger," said Hernandez. "When and if a merger is to take place, labor deserves a seat at the table to voice our concerns and be part of the team that resolves these issues."

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