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700 Sue UPMC, West Penn For Break Pay; Nurse Shares Story With WTAE

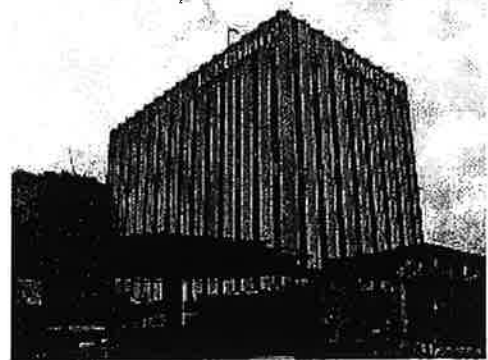
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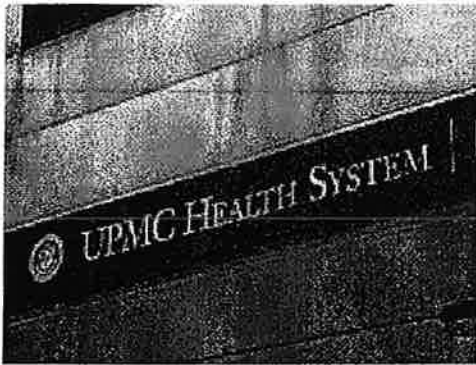
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PITTSBURGH -- Almost 700 workers from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center hospitals and West Penn Allegheny Health System are suing for wages they say they're owed by their employers, who allegedly made them work through lunch hours and meal breaks.



Video: 700 Sue UPMC, West Penn For Break Pay; Nurse Shares Story With WTAE



UPMC (the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center)

The class-action lawsuits claim the hospital systems failed to pay workers for all of the hours they worked, automatically taking money from the employees' paychecks -- even though the employees worked during their entire shift.

The two health systems "have systemically cheated their employees out of millions of dollars of pay," attorney Nelson Thomas said at a news conference Wednesday.

"In health care, it's always that the patient is No. 1," said Yvonne Taylor, a registered nurse who worked at UPMC Mercy Hospital. "Someone has a heart attack or an arrest, you have an arrest on the floor. Lunch is out of your head. It's the patient you have to see about."

WTAE Channel 4's Bob Mayo reported that the class-action lawsuits claim the hospitals automatically docked employees a half-hour for lunch, whether or not they actually worked through the lunchtime.

The suits also claim that the hospitals failed to pay workers overtime for training taking place outside of employees' shifts, Mayo reported.

Taylor, who is now retired, told Channel 4 Action News about the demands of the nursing profession.

"If I had a lot of families, then I had to be there with them, or if a lot of the doctors were coming

out of surgery, I had to be there when they called, looking for their families," said Taylor. "It wasn't just, like, it's 12 noon, go to lunch. I just basically couldn't do that."

Thomas acknowledged that patients' needs must be met, but "it's wrong for the hospitals to be taking the money out and not paying for work that's being done," he said.

Federal labor law makes it clear that employers can be breaking the law if they automatically deduct for lunch hour without assuring the employees get that time off, Thomas said.

"In the hospital settings, particularly as these hospitals have cut back on staff, they've forced people to work longer hours and work through their meal breaks to cover patient needs. Although patient needs do need to be met, it's wrong for the hospitals to be taking the money out and not paying for the work that's being done," Thomas said.

As of Wednesday, 462 current or former UPMC employees and 230 current or former West Penn Allegheny employees have signed on to the lawsuit.

If certified as a class-action lawsuit, attorneys said more than 100,000 people could be eligible. Potential damages could range from \$7,000 to \$29,000 for each individual, Mayo reported.

A spokesman for UPMC told The Associated Press that Dolin, Thomas and Solomon -- the law firm representing the workers -- solicits such claims by direct mail.

UPMC said it's aware of the legal action and will vigorously defend itself. West Penn Allegheny had no comment.

Dolin, Thomas and Solomon has handled similar cases across the country. Employees are being directed to www.hospitalovertime.com for more information.

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