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Amber DeSouza, a nurse at Backus Hospital, recently joined the growing ranks of health care workers victimized by a patient in their care. She said she's speaking publicly about what happened to her because she wants to raise awareness about the "urgent need" to improve health care workers' safety. (Sarah Gordon/The Day)

Backus nurse injured in encounter with patient is speaking out

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By Brian Hallenbeck
Day Staff Writer

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Norwich — Kicked in the chest with enough force to knock the wind out of her, Amber DeSouza, a registered nurse at Backus Hospital, recently joined the growing ranks of health care workers victimized by a patient in their care.

DeSouza, 35, isn't taking the incident lying down.

In a virtual interview, she described what took place on one of her overnight shifts after she revisited a particular patient's room during a so-called "safety sweep." She asked that some details of her account be withheld out of concern for the privacy of those involved.

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After an initial interaction with the increasingly agitated patient, DeSouza said she was summoned back to the patient's room to try to calm him. She said the patient, who wanted to get out of bed, which wasn't permitted, took her hand, squeezed it and wouldn't let go. Then, she said, he kicked her under her left breast, sending her reeling backwards.

In severe pain, DeSouza was treated in Backus' emergency room, where she was found to have a left chest wall contusion, left rib contusion and a probable single hairline rib fracture. Deemed "totally disabled," it would be weeks before she could return to work.

The day after the incident, DeSouza decided to press charges against the patient, a decision she said Backus' security department fully supported. She reported the incident to Norwich police, which took her statement.

An investigation of the incident is still "active and open," Norwich police Capt. Thomas Lazzaro confirmed last week.

DeSouza, whose contact with The Day was coordinated through her union, the Backus Federation of Nurses, Local 5149 of AFT Connecticut, said she's speaking publicly about what happened to her because she wants to raise awareness about the "urgent need" to improve health care workers' safety. It's not just a workplace issue, she said; it's a public health issue.

"One of my biggest concerns is that nurses and other frontline health care workers, not only at Backus but across the country, are facing an increasing amount of violence," DeSouza said. "There are policies and protocols in place to protect us, but not enough preventative measures to stop these incidents before they occur. It's systemwide."

Inadequate staffing

DeSouza and other registered nurses belonging to the union have said inadequate staffing levels at the hospital are a major reason nurses and others are at risk. They've also cited a need for metal detectors to screen for weapons and other dangerous items in the possession of patients, their family members and other visitors entering the hospital. And, DeSouza said, there needs to be better communication among staff regarding patients' histories and their potential for behaving erratically.

"I felt like I was walking in blind," she said, referring to how little she knew about the agitated patient the day of the incident.

DeSouza said Backus managers, including Rebecca Durham, vice president of patient care services, have been supportive of her in the wake of the incident. A spokeswoman for Hartford HealthCare, Backus' corporate parent, said the so-called HIPPA law that prohibits the disclosure of patients' health information, prevented Backus management from discussing incidents like the one involving DeSouza.

"Across the nation, threatening behavior is on the rise," Tina Varona, Hartford HealthCare's senior director of media relations, wrote in an email. "We are

committed to being the safest place for our colleagues to provide care for our patients, families, and communities.

“We consistently evaluate our safety protocols and are evolving to meet the changing environment.”

In addition to DeSouza, two other members of the nurses’ union spoke to The Day about incidents of violence against nurses at Backus.

One of them, David Pfau, who’s spent the last four years of his 25-year nursing career working in the Backus emergency room, said he’s personally experienced mistreatment by patients numerous times. He said he’s been spat upon, kicked in the head, kicked in the stomach, scratched, “bitten more than once,” verbally abused “countless times” and threatened.

He’s known colleagues who’ve been treated worse, he said, though none as bad as DeSouza, with whom he serves on a committee that’s working on the problem.

Pfau said he’s not so sure physical violence against health workers has increased much during his 25 years in nursing. He said it seems to him it’s been pretty consistent, while the level of verbal abuse has skyrocketed.

Over time, he said, management has become more supportive of nurses and others who file legal claims against patients who’ve attacked them, even encouraging them to do so in some cases.

Both Pfau and Danielle Berriault, a registered nurse who serves as vice president of Local 5149, noted incidents in recent weeks in which weapons were discovered inside Backus. In one, an off-duty police officer had carried his gun into the emergency room while in another a patient admitted to the hospital was found to be in possession of a knife.

Pfau said he has found knives on patients as well as mace and, on one occasion, a small axe.

While Backus management has in the past rejected metal detectors, Berriault said the union’s recent discussions with hospital representatives suggest the hospital may be considering installing the devices. In recent months, Lawrence + Memorial Hospital in New London activated weapons detectors capable of finding metallic and non-metallic threats at its main and emergency-room entrances.

Safe patient limits

In recent meetings with management, Berriault said her “big talking point” has been safe patient limits — the idea that a nurse can be assigned responsibility for a maximum number of patients in certain situations. She said nurses are encouraged that the Joint Commission, the nonprofit agency that accredits health care facilities in most states, including Connecticut, will formally recognize nurse staffing as a performance goal, starting next year.

As Becker’s Healthcare, a media platform serving the health care industry, reported last week, the commission’s new rule will require hospitals seeking accreditation to

meet certain standards related to staffing and oversight. Health care organizations will have to have an executive responsible for overseeing nurse staffing policies and procedures and a registered nurse on duty to either directly provide care or supervise nursing services provided by other staff 24/7.

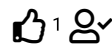
“There must be an adequate number of licensed nurses, licensed practical nurses and other staff to provide nursing care to all patients, as needed,” the new rule states.

The American Nurses Association called the rule’s adoption a “defining moment” for the nursing profession.

“The safety of nurses has to be the highest priority,” DeSouza, the Backus nurse, said. “If we’re not safe, we can’t take care of patients.”

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William Dennis

10/26/2025 8:01 PM

Behind every wall of every hospital are our nurses. They are dedicated life savers and care givers 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, including every holiday of the year. I have the highest respect for all of them. We as a society need to give them the best pay and benefits possible. Protect them from violent patients even if it means PROTECTION Over HIPPA Laws. Please allow me to include all of our hospital staff such as patient care techs (PCTs), cleaning personnel, x-ray techs, security, etc. Thank You All for What You Do.



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Nancy Middleton

10/26/2025 3:19 PM

I was a nurse at a local community hospital for over 20 years, 6 years on the night shift. I was attacked by patients a couple of times and heard of other incidents. For the most part, these didn't cause serious injuries. Bringing charges against patients should be carefully evaluated because there are often mitigating circumstances. Patients are - obviously - ill; they may be on meds that cause untoward effects. Patients may have a dementia or mental illness worsened by physical illness. Not uncommonly, people don't report or under report their alcohol and/or drug use; sudden abstinence can cause serious, sometimes aggressive, effects and DTs. Ideally, people should be honest with their histories, but human nature doesn't always cooperate. Ms. DeSouza was seriously injured and the hospital's security

people support her decision to file charges, so perhaps this patient had an established history of aggression and violence. I'm sure the circumstances were carefully evaluated. Ideally adequate staffing (and honest communication) could lessen attacks against nurses, but the problem may be part of larger, societal issues, and there have been nursing shortages for...always, getting worse now with an aging population and high retirement rates.



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KEITH J. ROBBINS

10/26/2025 6:45 AM

Arrest, prosecute, fine and incarcerate the offenders all the time...usually sends the message



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