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LERA Session Title: Linking Work Practices and Organizational Outcomes in the Healthcare Industry

Paper Title: Superbugs vs. Outsourced Cleaners: Employment Arrangements and the Spread of Healthcare-Associated Infections

Paper Abstract:

On any given day, about one in 25 hospital patients in the US has at least one healthcare-associated infection (HAI) a potentially deadly superbug such as Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) or Vancomycin-resistant Enterococcus (VRE) that the patient contracts as a direct result of his or her hospital treatment. Unlike some infections, the etiology of these HAIs is, from a medical perspective, simple and tractable: the spread can be halted through strict infection control practices, namely proper disinfection of surfaces and equipment. As a result, cleaners and environmental services in hospital parlance serve as the foot soldiers charged with defending hospital patients (and other groups, including employees and the broader community) from the spread of HAIs. Yet, labor relations scholars have shown that hospital administrators and others are unlikely to view EVS workers as part of the organization's key mission. Moreover, empirical studies of other industries have established an incontrovertible link between labor relations and product quality. Taken together, these strands of research suggest two worrisome hypotheses. First, hospitals are likely to have outsourced or otherwise externalized this key group of employees, increasing the probability that they are neither well-rewarded nor the recipients of training and other investments essential for stamping out HAIs. Second, these very common employment arrangements are likely to promote rather than counter the spread of HAIs. We find support for these hypotheses using a unique dataset that marries infection data to structural, organizational, and workforce features of California's acute care hospitals. The study provides labor relations scholars with a strong example linking employment arrangements to quality outside of manufacturing, in the service sector, in particular. The findings also send a message to the medical community that what it sees as an easily addressable issue of cleanliness requires a very serious reconsideration of their employment model for non-core workers.