

Religious leaders, hospital workers

By [Judy Harrison](#)

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BREWSTER - Churches, synagogues and mosques throughout the state over the past few years have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of food, clothing, heating oil and medicine to help out laid-off workers. Many of those items have been distributed in northern Maine by the Eastern Maine Labor Council, located off South Main Street on Ivers Street.

Clergy in the Bangor area are being asked to support workers' efforts to organize a union at Eastern Maine Medical Center. Hospital workers, labor council staff and others plan to meet Monday with ministers, priests, rabbis and leaders from the Muslim community to discuss how religious leaders and their congregations could aid the unionization effort.

About 3,000 people are employed at EMMC, one of the region's largest employers. Registered nurses at the hospital have been organized for more than 20 years. Nonprofessional workers at EMMC have been looking into the benefits of forming a local bargaining unit within a machinists' union for more than a year. Certified nursing assistants, housekeepers, food service workers, unit secretaries and other nonprofessional employees are among the workers who are looking for "a place at the table" when it comes time to talk about pay, benefits, rules and policies, according to labor council President Jack McKay. "I think it's very natural for unions and churches to work together on issues of justice, dignity and community," he said. "Religious and nonprofit organizations have been very active with our food and medicine program to help workers laid off from shoe factories and paper mills."

On Thursday, Jill McDonald, marketing and communications vice president for EMMC, cited the hospital's awareness of spirituality issues. "The dignity of each individual and the regard for each individual's worth as a human being EMMC supports along with the clergy," McDonald said. "We have a chaplaincy service available to patients, staff and their families. "The clergy in this region know us well," she said. "If they heard anything [in the meeting] that raised any questions, I hope that they would come talk with us."

Ayse Kaplan, a Muslim graduate student from Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Conn., and Emily Harry, a Methodist who lives in Chicago, spent the summer contacting clergy in northern and eastern Maine as part of their summer internships through Interfaith Worker Justice, a nonprofit organization in Chicago. The two women contacted nearly 100 religious leaders. About 25 or 30 are expected to attend Monday's meeting, according to Harry.

Seeking support for workers from religious communities seems natural, McKay said. "The organizing tradition I come out of maintains that there are circles of solidarity," he said. "An injustice to one group or individual is an injustice to all. In organizing, workers

move out from family to friends and to other members of the community. That includes religious and political leaders." The meeting Monday will include a listening session with workers, according to Harry.

For more information, contact the Eastern Maine Labor Council at 989-4141 or visit www.gbacdc.org.