



HEALTH WORKERS DEMAND ALLOWANCES BEFORE BAYANIHAN 2 EXPIRES JUNE 30

By Maricar Cinco
@maricarcincoINQ



Whatever happened to the P300 million supposedly meant for workers in the public health sector to cover accommodations, meals and transportation for services rendered between Sept. 15 and Dec. 19, 2020?

Over a hundred hospital employees in Metro Manila on Tuesday held a protest rally outside the Department of Health (DOH) central office to demand the immediate release of the money before the expiration of the Bayanihan 2 law, which appropriated the funds for the government's pandemic response.

Alliance of Health Workers president Robert Mendoza also asked President Duterte to call a special session in Congress that will extend the law's validity, after Malacañang disclosed that P18 billion in funds under Bayanihan 2 remain unused.

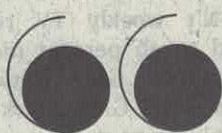
The Bayanihan 2 law has allotted a total of P165.5 billion for the COVID-19 response, as well as for economic recovery and stimulus programs.

In a public address on Monday, the President said he intended to use the unutilized funds to pay for the hotel accommodations of returning overseas Filipinos who need to undergo a longer period of quarantine.

'Repurposed'

In December 2020, the DOH ordered hospitals to return the unused portion of the amount before the year was over, since Bayanihan 2 was originally set to expire last year.

When the Bayanihan 2 law was first extended until June 30, 2021, the health workers



When the Bayanihan 2 law was first extended until June 30, 2021, the health workers demanded the release of the benefits due them and for these benefits to be converted into their cash equivalent

demanding the release of the benefits due them and for these benefits to be converted into their cash equivalent.

The Office of the President granted their demand on June 1, but the DOH Administration and Financial Management Team on June 8 wrote the Philippine Orthopedic Center (POC), one of the public hospitals whose health workers were entitled to the allowances, to say that the money had already been "repurposed" for other COVID-related activities, such as the vaccination program.

Mendoza said the P300 million was the sum of allowances appropriated only to the POC, the Jose Reyes Medical Center, San Lazaro Hospital, National Center for Mental Health, Tondo Medical Center, Dr. Jose Fabella Memorial Hospital, National Children's

Hospital, and the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine.

Bigger amount

In a phone interview after Tuesday's protest rally, Mendoza said the amount could be more since there are 72 DOH-retained hospitals.

Karen Faurillo, union president at the Philippine General Hospital (PGH), said P68 million worth of allowances were released to 4,800 PGH employees on June 18.

"But that was still not enough, since each health-care worker was supposed to get a maximum of P38,000 across (DOH) hospitals," Faurillo said in a phone interview.

The union official said the allowances were released to them at the PGH only because the hospital management did not return the money in December, unlike other public hospitals.

DOH statement

In a statement from the office of Health Undersecretary Leopoldo Vega, the DOH denied that the fund was "repurposed," and said that all excess money went to the Quick Response Fund.

"The funds provided for the DOH were intended for COVID-19 response and not solely for the provision of accommodations, transportation and meals [for] our health-care workers," the DOH said.

It added: "Such unutilized funds returned by hospitals were used to pay for the benefits of health-care workers who got sick and died of COVID-19, the salaries for [Human Resources for Health] augmentation in surge areas, and COVID-19 biosurveillance activities." INQ