

Nursing Shortage and Workforce Issues

ISSUE

The growing potential of a state and national nursing shortage poses serious consequences for the health care system. An adequate supply of educated nurses is essential to promote and protect the public's health.

POSITION

Support strategies at the local, state and national levels that further define and address the nursing workforce and shortage.

BACKGROUND

Numerous factors underscore the need to address the Nursing Workforce.

The Demand for Nurses is Increasing

- Overall, the U.S. population is increasing at a rate of 1% per year.
- The U.S. Census Bureau projects a rapid increase in the population of older American beginning in 2010 when the first of the baby boomers reach age 65.
- By 2010, the average life expectancy will be up to 86 years for women, and 76 years for men.
- The population aged 85 years and older is expected to double from about 3.5 to 7 million in 2020. As people age, the number of chronic health conditions requiring health care increases.
- The number of hospitalized patients who are older and more acutely ill is increasing thus demanding increased nursing intensity and increased use of the health care system.

- According to the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) shortage information, the U.S. will need 2,824,900 nurses in 2020 which is a 41% increase over the number available in 2000.

The Supply of Nurses is Inadequate and Will Become Worse

- Washington State has a low RN to population ratio of 781 employed RNs to 100,000 population; the national average is 825 to 100,000 population, (Bureau of Health Professions, 2004).
- In the Pacific region 28.8% of nurses are from minority groups (Bureau of Health Professions) while 33% of the population in the Pacific region belongs to a minority group (US Census Bureau, 2006). Washington State has an estimated 23.5% minority population (US Census Bureau, 2006) but fewer than 10% are persons of color (Skillman, Andrilla, Tieman, & Doescher, 2007). Nationally more minority nurses are needed to better serve the growing minority population.
- The average age of all Registered Nurses in Washington is 48.8 years while the average for practicing nurses is 47.7 (Skillman, Andrilla, Tieman, & Doescher, 2007).
- More than 31% of Washington RNs are 55 and over. If graduations do not increase beyond baseline of 2006, retirements will cause the supply of RNs to decline in 2015 while the demand will continue to increase (Skillman, Andrilla, Tieman, & Doescher, 2007).
- Workplace issues for RNs including overtime, sala-

ries, stress, staffing shortages, and lack of advancement opportunities can lead to early withdrawal from the workforce (Minnick, 2000).

- Graduations from associate degree programs increased by 48% and from baccalaureate programs by 50% between 2001 and 2005 increasing from 1,173 to 2,115 graduates annually (Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission, 2008) but funding for increases has ceased and maintaining current levels is a concern.
- About 23% of nurse educators are expected to retire by 2012 (NCQAC, 2008).
- State law mandates and accreditation standards require a minimum of a master's degree preparation to teach in nursing programs that prepare RNs. Critical shortages of qualified nursing faculty exist, potentially limiting enrollment in nursing programs. Enrollments and graduations from master's degree programs are not increasing.
- Faculty salaries are significantly lower than those in the care sector for individuals with comparable education.

Health Care System Changes Impact Nursing

- New information systems and medical technologies require a Registered Nurse workforce that is prepared to work with new technologies.
- An increasing shift in care to community-based settings requires that Registered Nurses understand how to work with families and communities.
- The nation faces a shortage of primary care physicians. This increases the demand for nurses prepared in advanced roles who can work collaboratively in assuring that the public has access to effective primary care.
- The 2009 swine flu issue highlighted the need for public health and community based nursing ser-

vices that can immediately mobilize to face threats of communicable disease. Due to the economic constraints in states and municipalities, these public health resources have been cut back severely affecting the ability of the system to respond.

- The changes that will be created by health care reform are still uncertain, but increasing the numbers of people with economic access to health care is almost certain to increase the demand for nursing services especially in the realm of preventive care and health education.
- Health care organizations are changing care delivery systems and often broadening roles for registered nurses. How this will affect the demand for numbers of nurses is unclear but broadened roles will require a more educated nursing workforce.

The Economic Situation Impacts Nursing

- WSNA acknowledges that the difficult economic times may require health care organizations to make difficult decisions about where to allocate scarce funds. However, regardless of financial circumstances, there is no substitute for the skills and expertise of registered nurses, both in direct patient care and in health care leadership in order to provide safe and quality patient care.
- Laying off direct care staff nurses or nurse leadership is dangerous and will lead to medical errors, poorer patient outcomes and nursing injuries as well as burnout. These outcomes are unacceptable.
- Cutbacks in salaries and benefits, along with reductions in continuing education and residency programs are shortsighted. These strategies will have a negative impact on nursing retention, and lead to unsafe patient care.
- Investing in nurse retention is financially responsible now and for the future. It costs \$80,000 - \$100,000 to recruit, hire and train a nurse for a job

opening. Creating a workplace where nurses are valued, respected and fulfilled reduces burnout, saves the facility money and reduces inefficiency in the economy as a whole.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Personal Strategies

1. Promote a positive image of nursing in every daily encounter.
2. Volunteer to serve as a preceptor or mentor and participate in mentoring programs.
3. Welcome students to your institution and support their learning to be effective nurses.
4. Volunteer to speak to youth and other community groups about health care issues and nursing careers.
5. Support scholarships for nursing education, especially for minority and disadvantaged populations.
6. Work with nursing organizations on recruitment efforts.
7. Engage the media in promoting positive images of nursing careers.
8. Maintain a personal focus on health and well-being in order to assure your own continued ability to provide vital nursing services.

Health Care Institution Strategies

1. Create innovative tuition 'payback' programs to support students during their nursing education.
2. Increase tuition reimbursement, scholarships, and support for nurses continuing their education.
3. Promote a learning environment in all health care institutions in which students are welcomed and mentored during their nursing education.
4. Institute mentor and trainee programs to assist new

graduates and new employees in adjusting to the work environment.

5. Implement recruitment and retention strategies including increased wages, enhanced career opportunities, and flexible scheduling, considering the needs of the aging workforce.
6. Improve working conditions by emulating care systems at "magnet hospitals" (Aiken, Havens, & Sloane, 2000):
 - Eliminate mandatory overtime.
 - Work with nurses to create clinical practice environments that support nurses in providing high quality care.
 - Work to ensure that Registered Nurses in all health care settings and at all levels of practice, from direct care to the executive level, have the opportunity to participate in the decision making that affects patient care and nursing practice.
 - Address RN staffing issues by using such strategies as increasing appropriate use of float pools, utilizing patient acuity measurement systems, ensuring adequate break coverage to safeguard patient safety and quality of care.
 - Include nurses in the decision making and planning surrounding working conditions and the work environment.
 - Provide nurses with ongoing continuing education promoting continuing competency including adequate training on new equipment and technology.
 - Enhance workplace safety (e.g. prevent environmental hazards such as violence in the workplace, needlestick injuries, and biological / chemical exposures; use safer devices or equipment; implement safe lifting strategies).

State-level Strategies

1. Fund and conduct ongoing data collection, and state-wide planning regarding the nursing workforce.
2. Increase funding for salaries for nursing educators.
3. Increase state support for nursing education, including part time programs at community colleges.
4. Increase funding for health professions scholarships, especially for minority and disadvantaged students.
5. Develop partnerships with community organizations, business and industry leaders, and other professional organizations (e.g. Washington Association of School Counselors) to promote nursing careers and recruitment into the profession

National Strategies

1. Advocate for expansion of federal grants and scholarships for nursing education, especially for diverse populations.
2. Support national efforts of professional associations and governmental agencies that address improving the image of nursing:
 - Promote consumer education efforts about nursing careers and the role of nurses.
 - Mitigate circumstances that suggest nursing is dangerous and difficult work (e.g. support use of safer devices and equipment).
 - Develop strategies to recruit and retain minority and disadvantaged students.
 - Participate in media campaigns that promote the image of nursing/role of nursing.

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