

## **Nursing Retention and Workforce Development**

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## *Abstract*

*In most sectors of the American economy, financial recovery has been very slow. However, the health care system has been growing robustly and it is virtually the only sector of the economy to steadily add jobs since 2001. This positive economic trend is expected to continue, given the projected growth in the demand for nursing care. A sufficient supply of nurses is critical to efforts to provide the population with quality health care. The current nursing workforce is dealing with issues such as generational differences within nursing teams, an aging workforce population, an increase in safety concerns, a chronic shortage of nurses and the chronic challenge of retaining skilled nurses. Nursing Workforce Development programs will be essential to efforts to address these issues.*

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*"Live for something. Do good, and leave behind you a monument of virtue that the storm of time can never destroy. Write your name in kindness, love and mercy, on the hearts of the thousands you come in contact with year by year. You will never be forgotten. No. Your name, your deeds, will be as legible on the hearts you leave behind as the stars on the brow of evening. Good deeds will shine as the stars of heaven..."~ Florence Nightingale*

In the 1800s, nurse Florence Nightingale became a reformer of hospital sanitation methods and an advocate for improved public health. She is credited with envisioning the nursing profession itself. Throughout the decades following her pioneering efforts, nurses became highly regarded members of hospital staffs. The nursing profession in the United States achieved its current popularity due to the indispensable work of nurses in World War II. Despite the fact that many of these nurses went to the front untrained, they received a wealth of specialty training while working to save the lives of combat victims. They brought home a set of skills and experiences that earned them the high respect of all medical professionals. Today, there are over 2.9 million nurses in America, or one for every 102 Americans, caring for over 8 million Americans a day (The History of Nursing, n.d.).

A would-be registered nurse must complete an associate's degree in nursing (ADN) and must pass the national licensing examination, NCLEX-RN. This education, training and certification combine to provide a solid foundation for a career in the healthcare field. In order to increase job security and professional opportunities, nurses have been expanding their education lately by seeking a 4-year degree, a masters or doctorate in nursing or by acquiring intensive specialized training in some particular area of the nursing field (i.e clinical nurse specialist). The American Association of Colleges of

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Nursing states in a 2011 report that graduations increased at the entry-level baccalaureate nursing programs to 6.7% per year and Master's Program graduation went up 12.7%. Enrollment in community college programs is still the predominant path for most nursing candidates. In order to be able to offer nursing students excellent training, community colleges are increasingly partnering with a local four-year school. Today, a handful of community colleges are now permitted to offer bachelor's degrees in nursing. Since 1964, the Nursing Workforce Development programs, under Title VIII of the Public Health Service Act, have overseen the supply and distribution of qualified nurses to meet the US healthcare needs. These programs bolster and even help fund nursing education at all levels. By supporting full-time students, the Title VIII programs are helping to ensure that nursing students are able to enter the workforce smoothly and fully prepared. The field of nursing education has seen another dramatic change. According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2011), enrollment of online nursing schools is almost 90,000, up from fewer than 30,000 a decade ago. New online programs provide a convenient source of training for working nurses (with ADNs), helping them pursue the higher nursing degrees currently in high demand, while continuing to work.

Nursing has long been a desirable career choice; however, the difficulties of managing the nursing workforce are growing as fast as the number of nurses. Healthcare facilities are dealing with the dual challenges of a chronic shortage of nurses in the job market, and the on-going difficulty that health care facilities have in retaining nurses who can always find another job opening. In addition to these two concerns there are other

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serious issues: the work place has recently grown more violent, threatening the physical safety of nurses; governmental healthcare requirements are ever more far reaching and complex; a large percentage of nurses are fast approaching retirement age; the American population's need for more nursing is climbing steadily; workforce burnout is a serious problem; finally, inter-generational nursing teams often generate additional stress.

Today's healthcare facilities have as many as four generations working side-by-side. Generational cultures can be quite different from one another and can bring inherent talents, but also divergent needs and expectations. New hires may include young ADN/bachelor/masters graduates with little to no experience, working alongside experienced nurses and also older, new nurses (who went back to school later in life to seek nursing education). In order for a healthcare facility to cast itself as an employer of choice, it must make serious, on-going efforts to address the pressures on nurses and to solve problems such as high turn-over and the friction often associated with inter-generational teams. Employers of choice are utilizing workforce development programs to improve nursing satisfaction in several important areas.

*Environment:*

The nursing profession is very demanding. Nurses are assigned full patient loads, and those patients are increasingly sicker (and heavier). The work is physically taxing. Hurried, stressed nurses can feel pressed to take short cuts, increasing the likelihood that they will injure themselves. Moreover, the workplace is becoming more combative and violent. Violence is up 40% according to statistics gathered by the International

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Health Care Security and Safety Foundation. Most of that violence is against hospital staff. A 2015 study by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration revealed that there is more violence in hospitals than any other workplace. (This American Life, 2016). Hospitals need to create a culture of safety in order to protect their staff, minimize errors and decrease worker's compensation claims.

Management:

Younger nurses tend to want to be trained towards excellence rather than 'managed' to simply follow orders without receiving a sense of the larger context of care and a chance for personal professional growth. Younger nurses want to be mentored so that they can develop within their area of expertise. Nurse managers must accommodate this expectation and learn to see the advantages of working with ambitious staffers. New training should include conflict resolution, time management skills and the art of providing positive recognition for work well done.

Generational gap:

GenXers as a demographic tend not to have the lifelong loyalty to an employer that baby boomers traditionally demonstrate. In addition, their job title does not define them as it does baby boomers. Millennials want to "play a meaningful role in their career by doing meaningful work that helps others" (Tulgan, 2004). They want to be involved in the process of improving their skills and having their input valued. Hospitals need to set up staff nurse councils where all generations are represented and participation is welcomed. When this kind of highly involved dynamic is established, a health care facility will be able to understand the management of the nursing workforce, offer

solutions and be involved in making improvements to the day-to-day realities of the nursing profession.

Retirement:

Naturally, looming retirement is a big issue for older nurses. Today, the average age of a nurse is over 40 years old. Efforts to retain the experienced workforce and delay retirement are important. In addition to looking at possible ways to reduce physical strain, health care facilities must give serious thought to the development of career paths that transition in a way that accommodates aging workers, allowing for a different type of work, improved schedule flexibility and/or a succession plan that makes eventual retirement smooth for both outgoing employee and the remaining team.

It has become essential to adjust workforce development programs such that they support not only nursing leadership but also the underlying clinicians so that the entire team has the tools necessary to navigate the new healthcare protocols and has opportunities to grow individually and collectively. In addition to designing these main, professional development classes, health care facilities will have to develop comprehensive mentoring programs. These will need to offer opportunities for new nurses to advance professionally, while also providing older, more experienced nurses the chance to move into nursing areas that are physically less demanding. These mentoring programs will have to help clinicians develop a 5-year career plan and a set of goals that will not only update job skills but will also provide avenues for moving into entirely new professional areas. To summarize, a mentoring program can make any RN's professional life exponentially better. A preceptor can help young nurses hone their

clinical skills and a mentor can help them acclimate to their new role within the organization. Mentors need to be nurturing, kind, and trustworthy, while displaying instincts for encouraging young and senior nurses, and talents for listening with an open heart. Conversely, mentorees must accept responsibility for their own professional development and growth, develop the habit of viewing mistakes as learning opportunities, and acquire the ability to look at issues from different viewpoints.

During the recent economic downturn and the need to navigate complex requirements of new health reforms, clinics and hospitals have tried to manage labor costs while protecting low nurse-patient ratios. Health care reform has presented both a challenge and an opportunity for nursing leaders who must find a way to boost nursing productivity while at the same time safeguarding quality of care, service, and staff engagement. Healthcare facilities that concentrate only on number-crunching and clerical forms, can easily overlook the *people* aspect of nursing that drives the productivity and the positive outcomes that facilities value. Nurses and clinicians dedicate their lives to ideals that cannot be quantified on spread-sheets.

Nurses play an essential, irreplaceable role in the delivery of great healthcare. According to the National Center for Health workforce, the nursing workforce has grown substantially in the past decade (Trossman, 2013). The growth of this professional demographic is outpacing generalized growth sectors in all other fields. As the American population ages, and patients survive operations that did not exist a generation ago, society is in greater need of healthcare facilities that can help promise a brighter future.



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Our society ignores the needs of nurses at its peril. In order to understand the issues that the nursing workforce faces today we must address the crises that define their professional lives. The workplace itself poses more threats to nurses' safety. Teams are comprised of highly skilled people who come from very different backgrounds. Patients have access to new kinds of surgeries that extend lifespans and increase the need for long term nursing care. Therapies have become more physically demanding. The quality of healthcare depends on the skills and the devotion of caregivers. Healthcare facilities of the future will have to remain focused on protecting the workplace environment, promoting professional development and satisfying the desires of nurses who are tempted to relocate.

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