

Employers and the Nursing Workforce: Seeking Local Solutions to a National Problem

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The nation's healthcare industry is under stress—driven by an increased demand for services from a sicker, poorer and older population, coupled with reimbursement that does not keep up with the cost of caring. At the same time, we are on the precipice of the greatest shortage of healthcare workers in the state and nation's history. Leading this wave of shortages are registered nurses of the “baby boomer” generation who will be retiring or leaving the workforce in great numbers within the next 10 years. Patients are admitted to hospitals, long-term care facilities, and substance abuse centers because physicians determine that 24-hour nursing care is required. The simple fact is quality patient care cannot be provided without the required number of professionally educated and competent nurses.

There are many employers of nurses in the healthcare industry including hospitals, long-term care facilities, home health agencies, hospices, schools, public health departments, colleges, universities, and physicians. As an employer of approximately 500 nurses in a regional hospital in rural southeastern North Carolina, I appreciate and applaud the role that nurses play. Nurses are there to:

- Provide care to the poor,
- Help make our sick children well,
- Provide comfort and healing to our elderly mothers and fathers,
- Help bring new life into the world, and
- Be there to provide compassion and love to our dying patients.

Much has been written about the impending shortage of nurses in our state and in our nation. I applaud the efforts of the NC Institute of Medicine (NC IOM) for convening a task force with the assistance of The Duke Endowment to study and to develop recommendations toward the resolution of this problem. Many of our state's leading authorities in nursing and nursing education worked side by side with nursing employers and the NC IOM staff to address this most important issue facing the healthcare industry.

It has often been said, “Like politics, healthcare is a local issue.” Whether you define “local” as state, a region within a state, a county or a community, that is where healthcare is delivered and where the shortage of nurses will be felt. I, therefore, believe many of the solutions to this problem should be developed and implemented at the local level. Every employer must take ownership of this problem and, more importantly, take ownership of the solutions in their own locale. The work of the NC IOM Task Force on the NC Nursing Workforce provided recommendations that employers of nurses should embrace and commit their time and resources toward implementing. Several of the recommendations that employers can have direct and meaningful impact on are as follows:

- Encourage the youth of our state to consider health careers with a special emphasis on nursing,
- Provide scholarships and loans to beginning students and those seeking to advance their level of educational attainment,
- Support and expand nursing education programs,
- Implement nursing recruitment and retention strategies,
- Provide a positive nursing work environment,
- Advocate collaboratively with state nursing leaders and trade associations for the NC IOM Task Force recommendations to the NC General Assembly.

Promote Healthcare Careers

Employers should begin initiatives to recruit the youth of our state and our nation into the healthcare professions. Employers should meet and develop strategies with public and private schools to expose and encourage young people to consider health as a career. Many examples across our state have already begun to develop, including the establishment of school academies, scouting explorer posts and school partnerships with community colleges, public schools and healthcare institutions. These programs allow middle and high school students to enter the nurses' places of employment to learn firsthand of

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this most rewarding profession. Bringing young people face-to-face with practicing nurses enables them to make a conscious choice in choosing their future area of study.

Provide Scholarships and Loans

Employers of nurses will find it advantageous to help with the educational costs of training new nurses. Employers can provide scholarships and/or loans to students who meet the admission criteria of their educational institutions. Employers can also encourage community foundations to fund these scholarships. "Growing your own" by helping to fund training of local people who have roots in the community is often more successful and less expensive than trying to recruit nurses from other regions or from abroad.

For those nurses already working in your facility, the employer will want to find innovative ways to help them advance in their field through further education and training. The employer can offer support through scholarships, loans and flexible work schedules to accommodate classroom schedules. This kind of support enables NAs to advance to LPN status and LPNs to earn an ADN degree. RNs need support as they work toward their BSN degrees and advance training for careers as CRNAs or NPs.

Support and Help Expand Educational Programs

Employers must proactively support and help to expand nursing education programs in their communities, whether at the community college or university level. For years, hospitals have served as clinical training sites, and we must continue to do so. It is also imperative that we take a look at our clinical site training and re-focus on how we can improve it. Employers with the resources may want to fund a faculty position at a local nursing school for a limited time in order to jump-start the expansion of that program. Finally, we, as employers, can advocate for our legislators to increase funding for nursing education programs throughout the state.

Develop Nursing Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Of course, employers will want to review regularly their pay and benefits for nurses to make sure that these are keeping pace with the state and region. Some hospitals have had success in recruiting nurses from abroad as a short-term measure that can supplement current staffing levels until other long-term efforts, such as those mentioned above, produce results.

One of the best retention strategies is the establishment of a mentorship program wherein a new nurse is paired with a more experienced mentor during the first year of work. This school-to-work transition is proving to be invaluable for the beginning

professional, who needs orientation and guidance during the initial phase of employment.

Provide a Positive Nursing Work Environment

Improving the work environment for nurses is an important responsibility for employers. Hospitals, home health agencies, physician offices and other facilities can do many things to increase job satisfaction despite the fact that only about half of NC nurses report satisfaction with their current jobs and about the same percentage would recommend nursing as a career to others. In turn, improved job satisfaction could reduce soaring turnover rates and save the employer resources by cutting down on the burden of costly recruitment of new nurses.

Hospitals, especially, report lower levels of satisfaction among their nurses than in community settings. As employers, we must find ways to address the stress and other work patterns that raise turnover rates and increase the recruiting of new nursing staff. For example, we must develop work assignments that promote a balance between work and home life for the nurse.

Our nurse managers are key players in improving the work environment for staff nurses. Employers must make sure that these managers have the leadership training and support of management to make the workplace both challenging and rewarding for their staff. Employers should invest in new technologies that can cut paperwork and other administrative tasks so that nurses can do what they entered their profession to do—take care of patients. This emphasis on support and collaboration should filter through all levels of the workplace, from administration to other healthcare professionals, including physicians and allied health personnel. Furthermore, employers should familiarize themselves with the principles of the Magnet Hospital and adopt similar strategies for their workplaces.

Advocate Collaboratively

While we work locally to solve nursing workforce challenges, we must also remember that we, as employers, must advocate for statewide and national solutions to the nursing shortage. We can do this by proactively bringing these issues to the attention of the members of the NC General Assembly and the US Congress. We must not leave the solution of these problems to our trade associations or to the state nursing leadership. Although local solutions must be developed and implemented to counter nursing workforce issues, the employer must also take ownership of the grassroots effort to solve this problem through advocacy at both the state and national levels.

Employers of nurses can choose to sit idly by and expect Washington, Raleigh or our educational system to solve the nursing shortage. Or we can choose to implement many of the recommendations of the NC IOM Task Force and to participate actively in the resolution of the nursing workforce challenges we face. The choice is ours! **NCMJ**