



## **UPDATE ON THE NURSING WORKFORCE: OCTOBER 2004**

- Q. What is the current status of the nursing shortage in Washington and Oregon?**
- A. For Washington, the latest data indicate that there is still about a 6% vacancy rate for Hospital RNs or a need for at least 1,700 more FTEs by next year. Oregon has a 4% vacancy rate for Hospital RNs. Over-all vacancy rate stands at 5%, with long-term care having the highest shortage rate.
- Q. Hasn't this shortage decreased?**
- A. Yes, it has decreased from ~7.4% in 2002. Our weak economy does have the impact of nurses who may have been working only part-time returning to the workforce full-time, or those not working at all returning to some part-time work. Still, >80% of licensed RNs are working in nursing.
- Q. Is the problem being resolved?**
- A. The demographics of the nursing population have not changed. The average age of RNs is 44.6, and retirements will produce more vacancies than we have now. Schools need to be able to accept and educate more nurses. We need to recruit and retain women and men from diverse populations so that our nursing workforce reflects the demographics of Washington and Oregon.
- Q. What are the major forces continuing this shortage?**
- A. As the population grows overall in our region, and continues to age, patients require more well-educated nurses to manage and directly care for them. Older, sicker patients' care is extremely complex. New technology creates the need for more well-educated workers. Consumers are more educated and more demanding of the kind of care that they have had in the past or believe that they need to have. The US culture is one of freedom and high expectations—and this applies to access to the latest and best in healthcare. Add these "demand" forces to the "supply" problems and we have a continuing shortage.
- Q. Where are there successes in addressing the shortage?**
- A. Both recruitment and retention efforts are increasing across the region, and organizations are looking for innovative models of both. Making the transition from learner to professional in the first years is critical to retaining new graduates from all programs. Creating learning opportunities for nurses in rural hospitals, where patients of all types require care but some specialty departments can not be staffed separately, is being done in some hospitals. Applying the information from numerous surveys regarding the factors that make nurses want to stay in an organization is critical. Efforts and legislation to increase faculty salaries to make nursing education an attractive career are under way. Special programs to attract and retain minorities have begun and need to be expanded.

**Q. How can technology impact nursing recruitment and retention?**

A. Electronic Medical Records (EMR) can produce accurate information, more quickly, so that nurses can make critical decisions. Students who've had experience with EMRs see this as desirable when they are looking at jobs now. Hand-held devices make the input of information quicker. Wireless transmission of information makes rolling "bedside" computer terminals lighter and easier to move and use. Tele-education and on-line education provide access for students and practitioners to participate in formal programs and C.E. without travel.

**Q. How can practice changes help with recruitment and retention?**

A. Models of staffing that make optimum use of the education and skills of each type of caregiver help staff feel more satisfied because they're using all of their capabilities for patients' care. "Zero Lift" programs that protect the patient and the care givers can support nurses to work later in their careers and prevent injuries. Equipment that allows some mobility but prevents patients from falling from bed prevents injuries to both staff and patients. Innovative shifts address the need for shorter work episodes while still providing the level of care that patients need. Organizations that involve staff in designing care delivery systems, inclusive of the aging workforce, attract and retain more nurses because they find satisfaction in this involvement in creating the daily work environment.

**Q. How big a part of our economy is healthcare?**

A. Healthcare contributes 10% of the workforce in Washington, and provides over \$8.8 Billion in wages. In Oregon, healthcare contributes to 10% of the workforce and provides \$5.3 Billion in wages. It's one of the largest segments of our economy here as well as nationally. To bring new businesses and jobs to our state, we need to be able to provide excellent healthcare for all of our citizens. When we don't have enough nurses we cannot do that.

**Q. Who can I contact for more information?**

A. Please call either: Troy Hutson  
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