



Strengthen Washington's Nurse and Allied Professional Workforce

The Problem

Hospitals, health systems and the patients they serve are facing critical shortages of nurses and allied health professionals. Worker shortages are a national challenge across nearly all industry sectors. For decades, the health community in the United States has been predicting major nursing shortages, with a particular focus on the aging population of nurses and retirements. According to 2017 data from the [American Hospital Association](#), more than half of all nurses were age 50 or older, and almost 30 percent were age 60 or over. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated existing health care staffing shortages, most significantly shortages of nurses.

According to WSHA's 2021 survey of acute care hospitals, there are 4,552 vacant Registered Nurse (RN) full-time equivalents (FTE) in Washington. According to the data, it would take 6,100 licensed RNs (full-time and part-time) to fill all the open positions in acute care hospitals – which only accounts for one of the many settings where nurses are needed. Hospitals are working hard to fill these critical vacancies, but the average number of days RN vacancies remain open after posting the job continues to rise. From 2019 to 2021, the average length of time it took to fill an RN vacancy in a Washington acute care hospital increased by 54 percent – from 74 to 114 days. According to the same survey, as of November 12, 2021, hospitals are utilizing nearly 3,000 travel nurses (temporary staff) to help fill some of the gaps, but it is not a sustainable nor desirable model.

The shortage of nurses is at the forefront of the workforce conversation for the 2022 legislative session. Hospitals are also reporting concerns with rapidly growing shortages of ancillary professionals, putting even more pressure on existing care teams. According to hospitals in Washington, the second-highest workforce need is certified nursing assistants (CNA), closely followed by housekeeping staff, medical assistants, lab personnel and various types of medical technicians.

Health care worker shortages are a complex problem that must involve the entire health care community coming together to find long-term solutions in the best interest of all Washingtonians. Workforce, and particularly the need to rebuild and strengthen the pipeline of health care workforce, will likely continue as a high-priority discussion over multiple legislative sessions.

Proposed Solution

Hospitals and health systems are actively engaging with key stakeholders and policymakers to develop creative and lasting solutions to strengthen the health care workforce, and particularly focusing on nurses in 2022. The ultimate solution is to graduate more nurses who will stay and practice in Washington, and WSHA is collaborating with legislators and key stakeholders to increase the number of RN training slots by 800 to 1,000 – an increase hospitals can support with clinical placements. Nursing programs are turning away up to 1,900 qualified applicants a year.

To achieve this critical goal, multiple components must be addressed, including: (1) increasing availability of nursing education programs, (2) expanding capacity for clinical placements for RN students, and (3) supporting access to nursing education through financial assistance for students.

Hospitals and health systems are committed to increasing clinical placements to train more nursing students. To do this most effectively, hospitals need flexibility from nursing program partners to add weekends and potentially swing shifts and night rotations, as well as year-round rotations. In conjunction with this commitment, nursing programs need to also think differently about how to maximize the number of graduates.

Washington hospitals have a long history of supporting expansion pipelines for nurses and allied professionals and are poised to act as an engaged partner to support activities that may not be directly linked to hospitals but are closely connected to the larger goals to graduate more nurses and strengthen the health care workforce.

Budget Ask

The health care workforce crisis will require a substantial public investment and holistic approach to increase and retain additional nurses in Washington. WSHA continues to work with other health care stakeholders and the Chairs of the House Health Care & Wellness Committee and House College & Workforce Development Committee to develop specific budget numbers to support these investments. Hospital and health systems support the following initiatives:

Initiative	Summary
Increase the number of training slots at nursing programs	Increasing training slots at nursing programs across Washington State by an anticipated 800-1,000 graduated nurses each year.
Increase nurse faculty and nurse faculty wages	Increasing number of nurse faculty positions and faculty wages in Washington nursing programs (ADN and RN programs). Funding for preceptors was included in the Governor’s proposed budget.
Fund simulation laboratories	Funding simulation labs and ensure training of appropriate clinical faculty for labs. Funding for simulation laboratories was included in the Governor’s proposed budget.
Fund grants to nursing students	Providing grants to students to continue in health careers, such as financial assistance for NCLEX exam, childcare opportunities and other support for career ladders.
Increase loan repayments for nurses and allied professionals	Increasing loan repayments for nurses and allied professionals in various health settings, including acute and long-term care, including through the Washington Health Corps program.
Expand allied professional training	Expanding allied professional training programs. Providing one-time grants and ongoing funding to community colleges to expand high-shortage allied professional training programs, such as those for respiratory therapists, surgical technicians and pharmacy technicians. Hospitals will work to expand clinical training slots to support these additional students.

Secondary Support for Agency Budget Requests

Targeted funding to agencies for specific priorities will also help to bolster the health care workforce. Various agencies, such as the Washington State Department of Health’s Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission, serve as critical partners in developing long-term solutions to strengthening the nursing and allied professional workforces.

In addition to the primary budget requests, WSHA also supports the following agency requests related to strengthening Washington’s health care workforce, listed in order of priority:

Budget Request	Details	Agency
\$2,488,000 (federal funds)	Improving health professional credentialing – adds staff to reduce timeframe to complete processing of applications.	Washington State Department of Health
\$2,028,000 (other funds)	Licensing delays – provides spending authority to the NCQAC and meets the new expectation to process nurse licenses in seven days or less as mandated in the 2021-23 operating budget.	Washington State Department of Health, Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission
\$3,399,000 (2,638,000 GFS, 761,000 other)	Long-term care nurse staffing crisis – supporting continuation of efforts of the NCQAC to reform and sustain the nursing workforce in long-term care settings.	Washington State Department of Health, Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission

Legislative Asks

Support thoughtful scope-of-practice expansions as a creative way to extend health care workforce capacity. With critical health care workforce shortages, hospitals and health systems support deliberative and safe scope-of-practice legislation enabling providers to practice at the top of their licenses.

Support standardizing the number of clinical placement hours required to graduate a nurse in Washington. Currently, different numbers of hours are required to graduate, depending on the nursing program. Standardization and consistency of required clinical hours for nursing students across programs becomes increasingly important as hospitals increase clinical placements to ensure all nursing students can be placed.

Key Messages

- The nursing shortage not only affects hospitals and health systems but all levels of the spectrum of patient care. Now is the time to come together as a health care community to identify and advance long-term solutions to the nursing and broader workforce crisis. It is essential for all key stakeholders to think differently and constructively to address these challenges.
- Hospitals across the state are working to retain staff in the face of the pandemic. Hospitals want to invest in their workforces and especially in their local regions to give back to their communities. Many of the hospital retention activities involve financial incentives, such as increases in base pay, retention bonuses and extra shift bonuses. Additional retention activities include increasing access to mental health services, childcare resources, tutoring resources for children and more.
- Hospitals are concerned with the total number of RN travel nurses currently being utilized. While hospitals in Washington are relying on nurse travelers to fill the gaps left by the thousands of open RN positions, this is not sustainable. Contracting with such a greater number of travel nurses is not what hospitals want to do, but it is what must be done to ensure patient safety when there are not enough available nurses to employ.
- Worker shortages are a national crisis impeding nearly all industry sectors. They do not only impact hospitals and health systems. According to a CNN Business article, published on October 25, 2021, nearly half of American companies say they are short on skilled workers. ([link to CNN Business article](#)).

Contact Information

Ashlen Strong, JD, MPH
Senior Director, Government Affairs
AshlenS@wsha.org | 206.216.2550

Len McComb
WSHA Lobbyist
twomedicine@live.com | 360.951.1661