National Nursing Shortage Overview

For the past several years, the United States has been experiencing the most profound shortage of nurses in the country’s history. Healthcare professionals, education leaders and government officials have been working to address the crisis so that it will not continue to escalate, especially as additional demands are put on the healthcare system as the nation’s population ages.

How significant is the nursing shortage and what is expected for the future? The following statistics provide a look at this pervasive public health problem:

Prevalence of the Nursing Shortage

There is a growing demand for registered nurses (RNs) in hospitals and other healthcare settings. A 2011 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) stated that the healthcare sector of the economy is continuing to grow. According to a special issue of the Monthly Labor Review released in April 2011, the BLS reported that “the healthcare industry added 428,000 jobs throughout the 18-month recession from December 2007 until June 2009, and has continued to grow at a steady rate since the end of the recession.” As the largest segment of the healthcare workforce, RNs were recruited to fill many of these new positions. Additionally, The State of America’s Hospitals-Taking the Pulse 2010, a report by the American Hospital Association (AHA), showed that the RN vacancy rate remained at 4 percent in 2010 (down from 8.1 percent in 2007).

According to an article published in the New England Journal of Medicine in April 2013, there has been a remarkable growth of interest in the nursing profession since 2002 due to a confluence of factors. In fact, a study published in the December 2011 journal of Health Affairs stated the number of young people entering the nursing profession is surging, providing relief from the recent nursing shortage. This study was conducted by Drs. David Auerbach, Peter Buerhaus and Douglas Staiger, who found that aggressive efforts to make nursing a more attractive career choice have contributed to a 62 percent increase in the number of young nurses (ages 23-26) entering the field between 2002 and 2009. However, the authors of the study do not conclude that the nursing shortage is over given the growing demand for nursing care by older adults, new opportunities for nurses brought by healthcare reform and the need for more highly educated RNs.

- **Hospitals and other healthcare settings are facing a shortage of nurses.** According to a statement released in 2008 by The Council on Physician and Nurse Supply, it was determined that 30,000 additional nurses need to graduate from nursing school annually to meet the nation’s healthcare needs.

- **The nursing shortage is especially acute in certain regions of the country.** The AHA reports that in some areas, hospitals have vacancy rates as high as 22 percent for full-time RN positions. According to a 2011 study by Christine Kovner of New York University and colleagues at that institution and the State University of New York, one way to address long-term nursing supply issues would be to focus on the low mobility of new RNs, as nurses’ willingness to move remains an issue in insuring an adequate distribution.

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Why a Nursing Shortage?

- **The population is growing and aging.** According to the U.S. Census Bureau, between 2010 and 2050, the U.S. is projected to experience rapid growth in its older population. In 2030, when all of the baby boomers will be 65 and older, nearly one in five U.S. residents will require healthcare. This age group is projected to increase to 88.5 million in 2050, more than doubling the number in 2008 (38.7 million). Similarly, the 85 and older population is expected to more than triple, from 5.4 million to 19 million between 2008 and 2050.

- **Nurses are aging.** Nurses in their 50s are expected to become the largest segment of the nursing workforce, accounting for almost one quarter of the RN population. According to the *2008 National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses* released in September 2010 by the federal Division of Nursing, the average age of the RN population in 2008 was 46 years of age, up from 45.2 in 2000. Additionally, a 2006 report from the Nursing Management Aging Workforce Survey showed that 55 percent of surveyed nurses reported their intention to retire between 2011 and 2020, with the majority of those surveyed being nurse managers.

- **Nursing school enrollment and graduation rates have increased, but shortage still looms.** In October 2010, the *Institute of Medicine released its landmark report on The Future of Nursing*, which called for increasing the number of baccalaureate-prepared nurses in the workforce to 80 percent and doubling the population of nurses with doctoral degrees. Yet, a shortage of nursing school faculty is restricting nursing program enrollments. While the *American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) reported* a 2.6 percent enrollment increase in entry-level baccalaureate programs in nursing in 2013, this increase is not sufficient to meet the projected demand for nursing services. In fact, according to AACN, U.S. nursing schools turned away 79,659 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2012 due to insufficient number of faculty, clinical sites, classroom space, clinical preceptors, and budget constraints.