How to Strengthen Your Nurse Retention Strategy

Focus on continuous monitoring and improvement to retain clinicians

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Introduction

Nursing workforce issues are at an inflection point. The supply and demand of nurses shifted rapidly during the pandemic, and the need for the existing number of nurses to care for COVID-19 high-acuity patients overwhelmed the health care system.

Even as the pandemic began to abate, the delta between nurses returning to the bedside versus remaining home or opting to work in an alternate profession reduced the number of nurses available to work in health care.

In fact, staff recruitment and retention were cited as the No. 1 challenge by respondents to a American Organization for Nursing Leadership longitudinal study. Nearly 70% of respondents ranked retention and recruitment as the top challenge their organizations faced between July 2020 and November 2023.

These trends and other data point to the increasing need for health care leaders to develop effective nurse retention strategies, even as some data show more nurses are returning to the field.

This Trailblazers report from the American Hospital Association's Market Scan identifies common reasons why nurses leave their positions and how to build a robust nurse retention strategy while driving effective and safe care in facilities. ●

Taking a Continuous Improvement Approach to Nurse Retention

T he COVID-19 pandemic tested the performance of every aspect of the health care system in the U.S. like no event in recent memory. Hospital and health system nursing retention strategies were no exception.

Like some aspects of the health care system whose performance was tested by the unprecedented public health emergency and accompanying stress level it put clinicians under, nurse retention efforts suffered. Some nurses retired early, others left the profession or quit without having another job. Others streamed out the door for higher-paying positions or travel gigs or left hospitals and health systems for positions in other health care settings.

While these situations all existed to some extent prior to the pandemic, they were exacerbated by the public health emergency. This underscored the increased need for hospitals and health systems to strengthen their nurse retention strategies.

Although nurse turnover and vacancy rates are coming down from their pandemic highs [see Charts 1 and 2], forward-thinking organizations are building more resilient, effective and robust nurse retention strategies in the wake of their COVID-19 experiences.

Many hospitals and health systems are repurposing lessons learned from the pandemic as building blocks of their reimagined nursing retention strategies. They're also adopting a continuous improvement approach to make retention efforts more

Chart 1
Hospital staff RN turnover rate by year
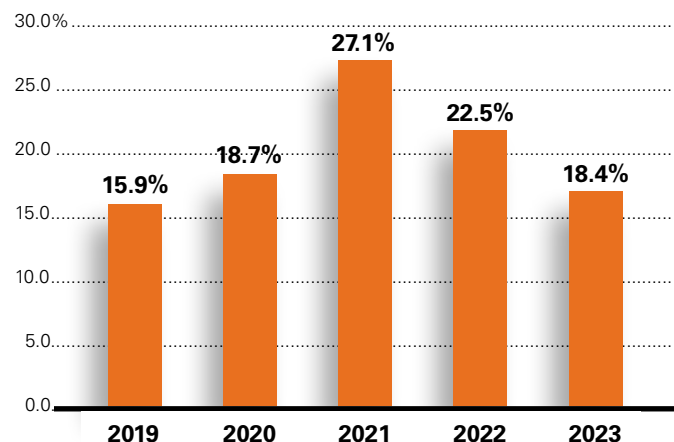
Source: NSI Nursing Solutions

Chart 2
Average hospital staff RN vacancy rates by year
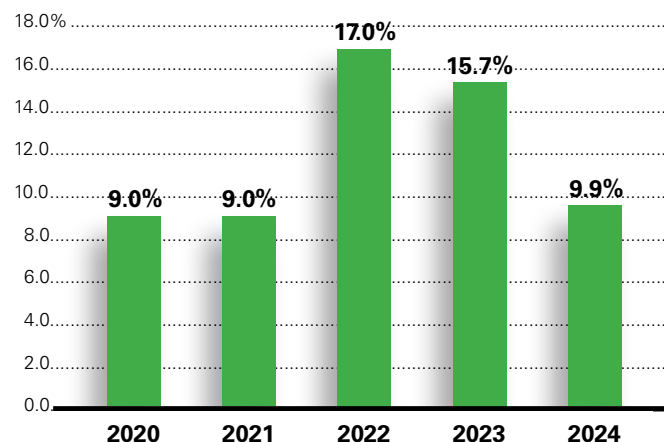
Source: NSI Nursing Solutions

nimble and more responsive to the changing needs of their nursing workforce. The other benefits of this approach are more effective and safer care for patients and better financial performance for their organizations.

Various continuous improvement models have different steps and a different number of steps in their approaches. Regardless of the model, one step is constant: study. To build more resilient, effective and robust retention strategies providers must continuously take the pulse of their nursing staff. Think of it as continuous patient monitoring but for nurses.

Nurse.org, the online community of nurses, published its latest annual State of Nursing report in May 2024. This year's report is based on a survey of nearly 2,500 nurses. Of those who said they're planning to leave their current nursing position, salary and frustration topped their reasons why.

The reasons why nurses leave their employers and the order of those reasons change. The reasons and their rank order may be specific and unique to a hospital or health system at a single point in time. Nurse retention strategies must address those issues so employers can respond promptly and appropriately. This requires organizations to adopt an omnichannel approach that continuously takes the pulse of all nurses on staff. The approach can include surveys, standing committees, regular meetings, employee evaluations, exit interviews, social media, job boards, online communities, feedback loops, conversations with informal leaders and other clinicians, organizational self-assessments and more.

Chart 3
Why Nurses Leave
Top 10 reasons why nurses intend to leave their current nursing position, in ranked order

1 | **To make more money.**

2 | **Frustration with current administration.**

3 | **Want an organization that has a better staffing ratio.**

4 | **Seeking a different nursing role.**

5 | **Want a more flexible schedule.**

6 | **Seeking better employee benefits and support programs.**

7 | **Want a better career path.**

8 | **Frustration with coworkers.**

9 | **Desire to spend more time with patients.**

10 | **Seeking an organization with a better reputation.**

Source: Nurse.org, 2024 State of Nursing report

"It's certainly vital to understand past data trends through a retrospective analysis. But organizations will also need to be agile while monitoring and analyzing data on a consistent basis. This will provide them with an opportunity to address short-term challenges, develop actionable steps to better meet the needs of their workforce. The goal is to hard wire a continuous quality improvement process to drive enhancements in retention, career growth, and resilience."

— **FELICIA SADLER** —
Vice president of quality, Relias

Addressing the Challenge With People, Processes and Technology

Another tenet of continuous improvement, regardless of the model, is action. Leaders of any continuous improvement initiative must act on the data and information they're continuously gathering. In this case, hospitals and health systems must act on the data and information they're gathering from continuously monitoring the pulse of their nursing staff.

The actions hospitals and health systems take to retain their nurses based on the workplace intelligence they've collected often will fall into three categories: people, processes and technology (see diagram below). Hence, the three questions hospitals and health systems should ask when they put their upgraded nurse retention strategies into action:

- What people solution can we use to address a current retention problem?
- What process solution can we use to address a current retention problem?
- What technology solution can we use to address a current retention problem?

For many retention challenges, the answer can be a combination of any of the three solution categories to maintain engagement between nurses and their organizations throughout their tenures.

A study published in JAMA Health Forum in July 2023 shows how interventions like the ones previously mentioned can improve nurses' feelings of well-being in the workplace and improve retention. The study is based on a 2021 survey of nearly 16,000 nurses at 60 Magnet-designated hospitals in the U.S.

Why Nurses Stay

Hospital interventions associated with nurse workplace well-being. In ranked order cited by nurses as "very important"

1 | Improve nurse staffing levels.
2 | Support for all clinicians to take breaks without interruption.
3 | Improve team communication.
4 | Enable clinicians to spend more time in direct patient care.
5 | Increase individual control of scheduling.
6 | More resources to support new-to-practice clinicians.
7 | Reduce clinician time spent on documentation.
8 | Not having to routinely work unscheduled hours.
9 | Greater leadership openness to clinician-led innovations.
10 | Reduced emphasis on meeting external quality metrics.

Source: JAMA Health Forum, 2023

PEOPLE | Examples of solutions

- Prioritize ongoing training and education to develop new skill sets and competencies as gateways to career advancement and opportunities.
- Offer easily accessible emotional support and well-being programs.
- Create mentorship programs for new nurses.

PROCESS | Examples of solutions

- Automate onboarding, orientation and training for new hires to drive immediate engagement and reduce first-year resignation rates.
- Buy or build self-scheduling tools to align personal and family needs with work schedules.
- Develop and embrace shared governance models.

TECHNOLOGY | Examples of solutions

- Offer on-demand learning platforms to enable nurses to learn new skill sets and competencies at their own pace.
- Automate administrative and operational functions with technology to allow nurses to spend more time on direct patient care.
- Improve access to patient records through electronic health record systems.

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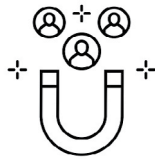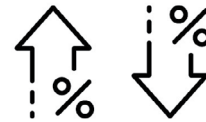
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OSF Healthcare is a 16-hospital integrated delivery system based in Peoria, Illinois. OSF operates two nursing colleges: Saint Francis Medical Center College of Nursing, also in Peoria, and Saint Anthony College of Nursing in Rockford, Illinois. Despite having its finger directly on the pulse of the nursing profession through the two nursing schools, OSF is not immune to the same challenges affecting nurse turnover and vacancy rates at other hospitals and health systems.

Yet, at the same time, because it has its fingers directly on the pulse of the nursing profession, OSF knew what to do about several of those trends — trends like nurses wanting:

- More resources to support new-to-practice nurses
- More resources and education to practice at the top of their licenses
- More clinical decision-making authority
- More career advancement opportunities

Among the multiple approaches deployed to improve retention was the creation of an enterprisewide "corporate university" to oversee staff education and training. A team of 12 system educators runs the corporate university, which OSF launched in 2023 with the assistance of Relias as its nurse retention workforce enablement partner.

The corporate university opened learning paths, or "paths to competency" for thousands of the system's employees, including nurses. Prior to the corporate university, OSF did offer staff education and training but in a less structured and less self-directed format.

The educational objectives of the OSF corporate university range from supporting practice changes to optimizing policies and procedures. Programs include nursing orientation, technical orientation, critical care courses, workplace violence and global training programs.

After the deployment of the corporate university, the health system saw a threefold increase in courses completed from 7,977 in 2021 to 28,452 in 2023.

The corporate university structure has been particularly helpful to new nurses. The nurse orientation and onboarding learning modules dramatically reduce time to practice for new hires. That, in turn, fills open positions on hospital floors and units more quickly much to the appreciation of nurses working on those floors and units. Current nurses also benefit from training modules that enable them to fulfill licensing and continuing education requirements easily and more efficiently. ●

READ the full case study.

"It's a bonus for employees to have access to something that they would then not have to go elsewhere and purchase. Globally speaking, it's been very favored because of the ease of access. Our vision is that individuals will become accustomed to looking for resources on a specific topic and come here to search first."

— **JILL GREENWOOD-WILLIAMSON** —
Director of clinical education, OSF Healthcare

Explosive Growth Required a New Way of Getting All Nurses On the Same Page

PAM Health is an integrated delivery system based in Enola, Pennsylvania. It operates long-term acute care hospitals, inpatient rehabilitation hospitals, outpatient rehab clinics, inpatient behavioral health hospitals, home health and hospice services at more than 60 sites in 17 states.

PAM Health's diversity of services, disparate locations and explosive growth over the past three years have created a unique challenge for the health system — getting all its nurses on the same page in terms of policies, procedures, staff education and training, skill sets, competency levels and corporate culture.

That objective extends to new nurse hires, current nurse employees and nurses from newly acquired PAM Health care sites. In less than three years, PAM Health has grown from 41 care sites to 63, and recently announced plans to build four freestanding physical medicine and rehabilitation hospitals in four different states.

PAM Health's rapid expansion — with no signs of slowing down — has brought thousands of additional patients and employees into the system. With its rapid growth, the organization needed automated, user-friendly human resources and training processes — and needed them fast.

The system partnered with Relias to build an automated platform with a specific learner portal for clinicians, including nurses. Through the portal, nurses easily can access online onboarding, orientation, and training and education modules.

Nurses also can search the platform for their specific state licensing or continuing education requirements and find training and education modules tailored to meet those specific requirements. In addition, nurses can complete those modules at their own pace, work toward meeting their certifications and produce proof that they've completed their course work.

Getting nurses on the same page regarding the consistent provision of safe and effective care for patients addresses one of the root causes of nurse turnover. Twenty-six percent of physicians and nurses surveyed from Magnet hospitals for a study on burnout, recently published in JAMA Health Forum, gave their hospitals a grade of C, D or F for burnout related to frequent turnover and patient safety concerns.

PAM Health also offers annual training plans for all employees, including nurses, through the platform. The system divides each annual training plan into four quarters with each quarter devoted to a specific theme. Examples of quarterly themes include regulatory compliance, internal compliance, job-specific training and new training needs that arise during the year.

To date, nearly 11,000 PAM Health employees, including nurses, have used the platform with an average of 31 completed training modules per user. ●

READ the full case study.

"My goal is to leverage technology to automate and enhance the development of PAM Health employees, ensuring they are equipped with the latest knowledge, skills and resources. This initiative aims to exceed patient care and experience by fostering a culture of continuous improvement, reducing manual administrative tasks, and enabling staff to deliver high-quality, personalized care more efficiently and consistently."

— **KEVIN KAHL** —
Vice president of employee experience, PAM Health

Conclusion

The recommended nurse retention solutions and interventions blur the lines among people, processes and technology. They also blur the lines as to who is responsible for building out a more resilient, effective and robust nurse retention strategy. That, in turn, requires its own solution — taking a team-based approach to nurse retention within a provider organization.

It isn't simply the chief nursing officer. It's not just the human relations department nor the information technology department. Absolutely everyone has a stake in the benefits of keeping talented nurses on staff.

Obviously, nurses have a stake in the benefits. Better retention means less turnover and fewer vacancies, which go a long way in addressing nurses' top concern: staffing.

The finance department also has a stake in the benefits. Better retention means lower labor costs. Less money is being spent on temporary nurses because turnover and vacancies are down. It also means that less money is being spent recruiting a new nurse. Filling a vacant nurse position costs more than $56,000, according to the 2024 NSI National Health Care Retention & RN Staffing Report.

Most importantly, patients have a stake in the benefits. Better retention means safer and more effective care. "Transitioning new clinicians from education into practice" topped ECRI's list of the Top 10 Patient Safety Concerns for 2024. "Without sufficient preparation, support and training as they transition into practice, clinicians can experience loss of confidence, burnout and reduced mindfulness around the culture of safety," the independent patient safety organization stated in March 2024 when it released its annual ranking.

Building more resilient, effective and robust nurse retention strategies elevates the entire field. ●

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