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THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE WASHINGTON NURSING WORKFORCE

WASHINGTON'S NURSING SHORTAGE IS NOT OVER

Although there are some areas in Washington where new Registered Nurse (RN) graduates are having difficulty finding jobs and hospital nurse vacancies are down, **this is not an indication that the nurse shortage is over**, as has been erroneously stated.

- The nurse shortage is not over – we have a temporary reprieve due to the economy in our state
- That current poor economic climate has a direct impact on both the supply and demand for RNs.
- Washington is among the lowest in the nation for ratio of RNs to population: 789 per 100,000 population compared to the national average of 824.ⁱ

THE FACTS

1. Washington's nurse shortage is not over – even though in some parts of the state new graduates are having difficulty finding jobs as RNs in acute care hospitals. Hospitals continue to report a 7% RN vacancy rate, especially in specialty areas such as critical care, labor & delivery, and the operating room.
 - Hospitals are giving hiring preferences to experienced nurses seeking employment.
 - Hospitals cite the cost of transition programs (residencies) for new graduates, in this time of economic downturn, as being too costly in the short term when other options are available to them to fill nursing vacancies.
 - Some hospitals cite that over-employment of new graduates in the last four years has resulted in large numbers of novice nurses on staff.
2. Washington's nurse shortage is distorted by the current economic crisis.
 - Experienced nurses are working extra shifts, converting from part-time to full-time employment, and some that were not working in nursing are returning to work.
 - Some older nurses are delaying retirement
 - Some hospitals are tightening budgets as the payer mix is shifting and there are fewer (profitable) elective procedures being done
 - Some hospitals are postponing new RN graduate transition programs and offering fewer opportunities to hire new graduate nurses
 - Washington's RNs shortage is driven by an aging baby boomer nursing workforce that is approaching retirement. There is still an insufficient number of new RNs being educated to replace nurses who will retire. A shrinking nursing workforce coupled with Washington's growing older population will continue to drive the demand for more RNs.
 - At the same time, care is becoming more complex in every setting--hospitals, home, skilled nursing facilities, ambulatory clinics, etc.
 - The UW Center for Health Workforce Studies projected a need of adding **400 more RN graduates per year, every year**, to meet the benchmark of the national average of RNs per capita by 2020

3. Nearly 50% of Washington’s RNs work in places besides our acute care hospitals.
 - There is concern that the nurse shortage will result in even greater shortages in Long Term Care, Home Care, Public Health, Clinics, Offices, and free-standing specialty offices as RNs seek employment in acute care hospitals where salaries are generally higher.
 - Even modest national health care reform improving access will be linked to the availability of an adequate nursing workforce, and will **create additional demand for RNs in all settings**.

NURSING EDUCATION: ONE OF THE SOLUTIONS TO WASHINGTON’S NURSE SHORTAGE

1. Significant progress has been made to build the nursing work force by increasing educational capacity in Washington’s schools of nursing and implementing innovative ways to educate students. The gains realized since 2004 must be maintained and exceeded to reach sustainable solutions to the nurse shortage. Our state’s health is at stake!

- Our educational capacity has increased by over 55% since 2005 ; 10,778 more nurses are licensed than in 2005.
- Enrollment for the 2010 fall school year was 69% higher than in 2004. Washington has 39 entry or “prelicensure” RN nursing programs, but we still turned away approximately 2,700 qualified applicants (individuals who had completed all pre-requisites) because of lack of capacity
- We need capacity for **at least** 400 more RN students per year beginning in 2010
- Faculty salaries are far below the market, making it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain nurses with the education and experience to teach nursing, compounding the problem further
- In 2008, there was a 40% increase in WA in the numbers of individuals who either declined or resigned from a nursing educator position due to low salary
- Only one nursing program has opened in WA in the last six years, the Rural Outreach Nursing Education program (which is an extension of Lower Columbia College’s program and is based in rural communities and at rural hospitals)
- Transforming our educational systems is a key piece to solving this problem

THE WORKPLACE FOR NURSES: THE OTHER HALF OF THE EQUATION

- Work environments that are safe for patients and staff, are adequately staffed, provide educational support, use nurses’ education and skills fully, encourage involvement in workplace decisions, and provide competitive wages and benefits are critical to stabilizing the workforce. There is much more work to do in this area of workforce retention.

Washington nursing workforce facts:ⁱⁱ

- Washington has approximately 80,000 RN’s licensed, but only 57,000 of them working in the state.
- The average age of the working RN is 48.5 years, older than the national average
- 90% of RNs under 55 years of age are working
- 62% of RNs report working full-time
- 49% of RNs are employed in non-acute care facilities
- Washington has approximately 14, 700 LPN’s licensed, but only 11,700 working in the state
- The Average age of nursing faculty is >50

ⁱ Registered Nurses per 100,000 Population, 2007. www.statehealthfacts.org

ⁱⁱ WA State Registered Nurse Supply & Demand Projections: 2006-2025. UW CHWS, Skillman et al. June 2007
WA State LPN Supply & Demand Projections: 2007-2026. UW CHWS, Skillman et al. August 2009.