

Nursing Professionals Need Flexibility to Serve Patients Best

Every nurse is different. Every patient is different. And every hospital is different. That's why nurses throughout Illinois have embraced the Nurse Staffing by Patient Acuity law, supported by the Illinois Hospital Association and the Illinois Nurses Association. Passed unanimously by the Illinois General Assembly in 2007, the law assures that direct care nurses have a strong voice in the nurse staffing process. The law respects the professional knowledge and expertise of nurses in many areas that impact quality patient care and the quality of the work environment.

More than 69,000 nurses work in Illinois' 200 hospitals and health systems, caring for millions of people each year, including more than 1.6 million inpatients. As a result of the Nurse Staffing by Patient Acuity law, nurses have a stronger voice in a wide variety of nursing care committees that focus on the unique needs of specific hospitals and nursing care units. Every committee has at least 50 percent direct care nurses, ensuring a strong voice for bedside nursing expertise.



BY HOWARD
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A Dynamic Process for a Dynamic Environment

"Cardiac services" is a great example of the range and sophistication of programs and nursing personnel in just one area. Small rural hospitals may have chest pain clinics, while community hospitals may perform open heart surgery. Academic medical centers provide cutting-edge, experimental surgeries and heart transplants. A "one-size-fits-all" nurse-patient staffing prescriptive ratio approach makes no sense across all hospitals.

Under the Staffing by Patient Acuity law, direct care nurses on patient care acuity committees recommend changes that can make a real difference. For example, based on recommendations from nurses on their committee, a Chicagoland hospital added an admission nurse 16 hours/day and a float night secretary for clerical support. Another hospital found success when the direct care staff requested that more RNs be added to the hospital's Rapid Response Team to lend additional support to the bedside nurse when a patient's status starts to unexpectedly deteriorate. And a mid-size Illinois hospital developed a care partner model pairing a nurse with a patient care technician on assignments. Nurses report they value the flexibility and support of the hospitals to test and refine various ideas. Shared governance, increased empowerment and greater staff involvement have also resulted in fewer open positions.

The law also reinforces an evidence-based approach to nurse staffing and requires every hospital to have a written staffing plan publicly posted.

"Ratios" Would Stifle Nursing Flexibility, Impact Access to Care

Illinois hospitals are committed to safe and appropriate nurse-to-patient staffing levels, which is the goal of staffing by acuity. State-mandated fixed ratios would not achieve improved care but instead would negate the benefits of the Nurse Staffing by Patient Acuity law, jeopardize quality, increase health care costs and reduce access to care. Nursing ratios eliminate the strong voice of direct care nurses and are a "one-size-fits-all" approach that undermines the professionalism of nurses. Such an approach fails to recognize that:

- A "right" ratio has not been proven in research studies or practice. Prescribing arbitrary and rigid formulas for nurse staffing across all shifts and units is inappropriate and inefficient.
- Every patient's specialized needs constantly change and must be evaluated in real time.
- Every nursing unit is different, whether it's the location (urban, suburban or rural), availability of nursing skill mix or the hospital's physical layout.
- Every hospital tailors its staffing plan to meet the unique patient needs within its community.

Earlier this year, the Illinois House and Senate considered bills, strongly opposed by IHA, proposing mandatory nurse staffing ratios. Nurses representing IHA member hospitals went to Springfield to voice their belief that the existing Nurse Staffing by Patient Acuity law enhanced nurses' work environment, maintained the nurse supply and promoted patient safety. Legislators heard those concerns and have not taken action on those bills.

Every day is different for Illinois nurses. There's nothing predictable about being ready to care for whatever patient enters the hospital. That's why IHA continues to work to maintain a health care policy environment that respects the professionalism and expertise of Illinois nurses and protects the lives of those they serve.

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