

Will the Trend Toward Higher Education Impact Nurse Supply?

Implications for Workforce Planning

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Shortages of nurses, particularly regional and specialty shortages, are widely acknowledged among care providers and in the health care staffing and workforce solutions sector of the health care industry. Orders for temporary nurses—including travel and per diem nurses—surged beginning in mid-2014 for AMN Healthcare, the nation's largest

nurse staffing company, and have continued to be so strong that they cannot all be filled with existing supply. This trend for both permanent and temporary nurses is occurring throughout the health care industry, and is clearly reflected in data from federal sources showing a widening gap of unfilled health care jobs over the last 2 years.

In this era of imbalance between health care workforce supply and demand, any new trend that increases job mobility for nurses, the largest cadre of health care workers and the backbone of patient care, could worsen existing staffing challenges. Therefore, the unexpectedly robust interest in education and training for career development, shown by nurses in the recent *Survey of Registered Nurses* by AMN Healthcare and the Center for the Advancement of Healthcare Professionals, may present a “good news–bad news” scenario for the health care industry. The survey was completed in 2015 and polled nearly 9,000 RNs nationwide. The most significant trends revealed were a pending wave of retirements by older nurses and the high degree of interest in seeking education and training for new career opportunities, particularly among younger nurses.

This latter trend could have unforeseen consequences. In today’s supply-constrained environment, an accelerated movement of younger nurses into other jobs, such as nurse practitioner, clinical nurse specialist, or care coordinator, could exacerbate shortages in medical-surgical and emergency departments, or other acute care areas. Such a problem was never envisioned when the Institute of Medicine issued its seminal report on nursing in 2010, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*,¹ which urged nurses to seek higher levels of education and training, practice to the full extent of their education, and seek to become full partners in redesigning health care. These remain exemplary goals for nursing today and in the future, just as they were in 2010. However, nobody could have envisioned, at the height of the recession when the report was drafted, that such recommendations, if brought to fruition, could aggravate a shortage of nurses. At the time, there was no nurse shortage.

NURSING SHORTAGE GROWS AFTER RECESSION

Today, the nursing shortage is acknowledged throughout the industry. According to information from AMN Healthcare, the nation’s largest supplier of temporary nurses, and with the largest database of clinicians, demand for nurses is out-

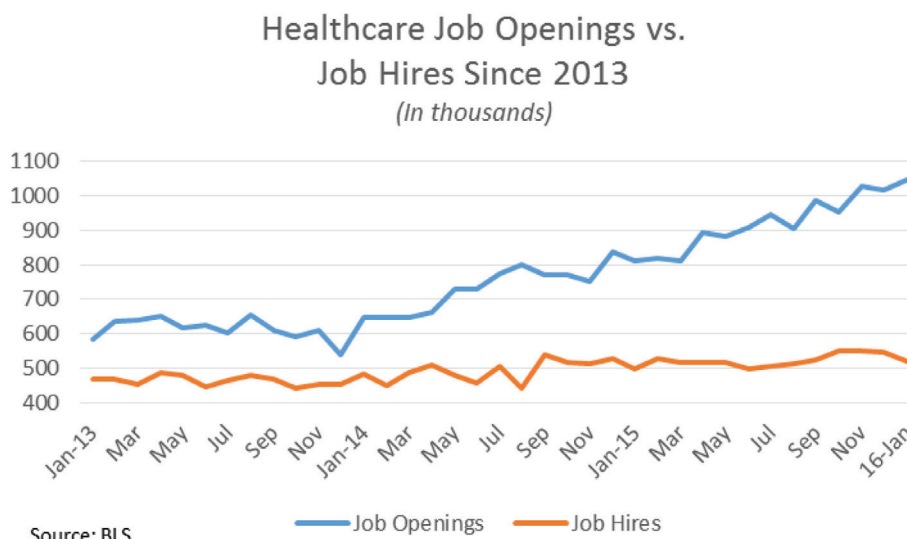
pacing the supply of nurses by a 2:1 ratio. Several research reports over the past 2 years have laid claim to the idea that there is no nursing shortage. Most prominently, perhaps, was the report *The Future of the Nursing Workforce: National- and State-Level Projections, 2012-2025*, by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration’s Bureau of Health Workforce, which found that supply would outpace demand from 2012 to 2025, including the growth in RN supply by 952,000 full-time jobs.² However, that report from the Department of Health and Human Services may have been disputed from another branch of the federal government. The Labor Department’s Bureau Labor Statistics (BLS) employment projections for 2014–2024 showed that total job openings for RNs would grow by 1,088,400.³ But the reality of the nurse shortage may be even more dire. BLS data for its Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey show that the gap between job openings and job hires has surged since 2014, reaching approximately a half-million unfilled jobs in January 2016 (Figure 1). Because nursing is the largest job category in health care, it can be presumed that many of these are nursing jobs.

Information from AMN showed that the surge in orders for temporary nurses that began in mid-2014 reached triple-digit growth percentage at one point and has remained strong. The cumulative impact of continued high demand and constrained supply have taken their toll on the health care industry. Today, hospitals, health systems, and other health care facilities cannot hire all the quality nurses that they need. With BLS estimates for total job openings for registered nurses approaching 1.1 million from 2014 to 2024, it’s not likely that demand will cool off.

STRONG TREND TOWARD HIGHER EDUCATION

The growing nurse shortage is coinciding with the growing interest among nurses, and particularly younger nurses, in seeking higher levels of education and training for their career growth. This movement within the nation’s workforce of registered nurses can impact shortages. Such an outcome is

Figure 1. Growing Unfilled Jobs Gap



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