



Executive Synopsis: Emergency Nurse Retention

The Situation

Nurses are entering and leaving the profession in higher than average numbers, which incurs higher costs for hospitals to replace staff. The cost of recruitment, hiring, and training for an individual nurse has been estimated to be as high as \$82,000 per RN; for a 300-bed facility, using the 14% national turnover rate, this translates into a potential four-million-dollar annual expenditure.¹ The actual cost of replacing a specialized, emergency nurse may be even higher when the additional training, verifications, and education for critical competencies needed to care for high-acuity patients is provided by the hospital. It is estimated that one in five RNs leaves the profession within one year of hire, while up to one-third leave within two years.¹ ED nurses are especially vulnerable to turnover because of their increased potential for developing burnout and compassion fatigue.² The ability for hospitals to retain trained and experienced emergency nurses in a cost-prohibitive healthcare environment requires action on behalf of hospital administrators.

The Problem

Emergency department nurses are exposed to a higher-than-average incidence of violence and often report career-ending workplace injuries due to the nature and pace of ED work.³ Caring for challenging patients with critical illness, traumatic injury, and behavioral health issues in a noisy, high-stress environment with frequent interruptions and distractions can contribute to excessive stress for the emergency nurse.² Veteran nurses with invaluable experience and mentoring capacity may consider leaving the ED for less stressful and physically demanding working conditions. In addition, while ED patient volume continues to increase, patient boarding decreases the amount of available treatment spaces.⁴ This stressful environment is exacerbated by hospitals reducing nursing staff to meet productivity goals, causing some EDs to require mandatory overtime to fill gaps. When nurses must work beyond their shift, at times over 12 hours, patient safety is impacted as fatigue makes nurses more prone to errors.^{5,6} Results of an international study show that nurses are most likely to leave an understaffed practice environment where safety is compromised and leadership does not support quality nursing care and shared decision-making.⁷

Evidence-based Strategies to Retain Nurses

- Perform a workplace assessment to identify root cause of nursing turnover; work with staff to develop action plans to improve retention⁵
- Create a safe and supportive work environment to prevent workplace injuries and promote work-life balance^{2,5,8}
- Offer flexible work schedules to meet multi-generational needs^{5,9}
- Use data-driven staffing models based on projected volumes and acuity¹
- Consider skill mix when distributing nurses across shifts⁶
- Reduce overtime demands with creative scheduling⁶
- Establish a culture of shared governance at both facility and department levels⁹
- Allow opportunities for nurses to participate in hospital committees and special projects⁷
- Promote advocacy for patient safety and quality of care⁷
- Maintain high visibility and be approachable as a Chief Nursing Executive⁷
- Hire transformational nurse leaders who will engage the “boots on the ground” staff⁷
- Provide opportunities for continuing education, professional development, and mentoring⁵
- Adopt Magnet program principles, even if Magnet status is not achievable financially or operationally^{7,10}

The Results

The majority of research that delves into nurse retention strategies states that a positive, supportive work environment is the number one reason nurses choose to stay in a department or facility, and the lack thereof is the number one reason nurses leave the department, facility, or profession.⁷ It stands to reason that the strategies outlined above are implemented by forward-thinking nurse leaders and lead to high-performing hospitals with low nursing turnover rates. Transformational leaders are curious, engaging, and motivating people who can profoundly influence the thinking and behavior of those in their charge.¹¹ Such nurse executives will be well aware of the relative costs of nursing turnover and recruitment versus retention strategies. With emergency departments facing higher patient acuity and an emphasis on fiscal accountability, it is worth investing in the retention of emergency nurses whether they are new, experienced, or near retirement.



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