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Employers Look for Ways to Keep Older Nurses on the Job

The graying of the nursing workforce is inspiring employers to tailor their benefits and environment to attract and retain older nurses.

The average age of registered nurses in the U.S. is 46.8, according to a federal survey. That statistic is especially distressing as most nurses retire in their mid-fifties. With nurses already in short supply, there is a clear need to entice them to stay on the job longer.

A mass exodus of older nurses would reduce the quality as well as the size of the workforce, according to Elizabeth Beaudin of the Connecticut Hospital Association. “All that experience and knowledge is going to go out the door,” she said.

Beaudin would like to see more opportunities for older nurses to transition into mentorship and teaching roles. The current shortage of nursing faculty is causing schools of nursing in Connecticut and across the nation to turn away qualified students.

About 12 percent of nurses cite physical limitations as their reason for retiring, said Alane Strong, RN, an occupational health nurse at Hartford Hospital, where she is part of an initiative to help nurses safely move patients. Moving patients is a frequent occasion for back injuries. The hospital began a program two years ago using research conducted by the Veteran’s Administration. Nurses are trained to evaluate a patient based on body weight, ability to cooperate and other factors. They then use guidelines to determine what they need to move the patient – everything from getting help from another staffer to using new technologies such as slider sheets and special chairs. Once the moving guidelines are established, the nurse posts them in the patient’s room so that all staff can follow the procedure.

The unit where the program was piloted two years ago saw worker injuries decrease by half, according to Pam Vecchiarino, director of medical and oncology services. It is now hospital-wide.

Older nurses bring a wealth of experience to the bedside, said Shelley Johnson, a physical therapist involved in the moving program. A back injury should not be “that one defining factor” that takes them away from the bedside, she added.

Similarly, Lawrence & Memorial Hospital replaced 164 older beds last year with high-tech beds that can lift patients to a standing position. These technologies benefit nurses of all ages, said hospital spokesman Kelly Anthony, while increasing comfort for patients.

At the Visiting Nurse Association of South Central Connecticut (VNASCC), the average nurse is between 53 and 56 – the age when most registered nurses retire. Vice President of Human Resources Margaret Firla responded with benefits attractive to older workers and opportunities for new nursing graduates to join the staff. The VNASCC offers flexible scheduling and shorter days to entice older nurses to stay on the job, Firla said, and gives benefits to nurses who work as few as 20 hours per week.

The agency is also welcoming new graduates, who were traditionally discouraged from home care because of the level of independent decision making required. At VNASCC, new graduates are paired with experienced nurses for about six months as they are staged into independence. Firla calls the program "extremely costly," but a necessary step to help young nurses succeed. The agency also provides a discussion group for new hires after six months of employment so they can share common practice issues.

The VNASCC is also the birthplace of the Nightingale Awards for Excellence in Nursing. President and CEO Joanne Walsh came up with the idea for a recognition event in part to retain nurses. "Working together with other healthcare leaders in our region, we created the Nightingale Awards for Excellence in Nursing in 2001 to both celebrate and elevate the profession of nursing," Walsh said. "We want to make a difference in the nursing shortage right here in Connecticut by emphasizing pride in the profession of nursing." Nightingale Awards are held simultaneously in four regions of the state. Each gala also sponsors scholarships for nursing students. For information about the May 4 events, call 203-777-5521 x1710 in New Haven.

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