

Address Nurse & Critical Caregiver Shortages Now

The American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living (AHCA/ NCAL) knows that sustaining and improving quality long term care depends upon a stable, well-trained workforce. Yet, the long term care profession – like many sectors of our nation’s health care system – is facing a chronic workforce shortage. Promoting and passing sound fiscal policies designed to strengthen our workforce and facilitate the continued improvement in seniors’ care quality deserves to be a top national priority.

According to estimates from the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Labor, the United States will need between 5.7 million to 6.5 million nurses, nurse aides, and home health and personal care workers to care for the 27 million Americans who will require long term care in 2050 – a greater than 100 percent jump up from the 13 million Americans who required such care in 2000.

While the demand for long term care is growing, the population of workers available to provide that care is not. A report by the National Commission for Quality Long-Term Care highlighted this impending catastrophe in stating, “even if we set the somewhat conservative goal to maintain the current ratio of paid long term care workers to the current population of 85-year-olds, the long term care workforce would have to grow by two percent a year—to the tune of 4 million new workers—by 2050.”

Compounding the problem of too few long term caregivers is the ongoing shortage of nurses and nurse faculty. Studies show that having a well-trained nursing staff is key to ensuring quality long term care since vacancies and staff turnover can compromise quality and increase costs. In mid-2009, AHCA conducted a survey to identify the vacancy rate for nursing staff during troubled economic times. Based on this survey, projections show that there were 50,000 vacant direct care staff positions as of March 31, 2009. Also, such shortages could worsen as older nurses contemplate retirement and leave the profession. According to a recent Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) survey, for those registered nurses age 55 and older, at least 76,000 plan to leave nursing within the next three years, while more than 54,000 plan to leave their present nursing position and are uncertain if they will remain in nursing at all.

Amending the *Nurse Reinvestment Act (NRA)*, which was enacted in 2002 with portions updated in 2010 by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, may provide a mechanism for addressing our nation’s nursing shortage. The *NRA* authorized funding for several initiatives under Title VIII of the *Public Health Service Act*, including scholarships and loan repayment programs. AHCA/NCAL supports efforts that build upon elements already outlined in the *NRA*; for example, permanently removing the exclusion of loan repayments for nurses working in for-profit health care settings would help to alleviate this critical shortage in the long term care nursing workforce. By further revising provisions in the *NRA* regarding nursing education loan repayment programs, loan repayment programs for nurses practicing in facilities that have a critical shortage of nurses or facilities that care for the underserved or high-risk groups like the elderly, and career advancement for all levels of nursing personnel, AHCA/NCAL believes that we will better serve America’s seniors today and into the future.

Ask Congress...

To amend the *Nurse Reinvestment Act* to include educational, financial assistance for caregivers in all health care settings; establish a national nursing database; & enhance the number of nurse educators.

Key Facts

- According to HHS & DOL, 27 million Americans will require some type of long term care by 2050 – a 100% increase from 2000.
- Also, 5.7 million – 6.5 million nurses, nurse aides, home health & personal care workers will be needed to care for these individuals based on HHS & DOL estimates.
- The National Commission for Quality Long-Term Care notes that “the long term care workforce would have to grow by 2% a year” to sustain the current caregiver to patient ratio in long term care.

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