

## OPINION

# Nurses are screaming for help; lawmakers should listen | Opinion

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The Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals held a rally on June 6 at the state Capitol in support of the Patient Safety Act. June 6, 2023. Dan Gleiter | [dgleiter@pennlive.com](mailto:dgleiter@pennlive.com)

By [Guest Editorial](#)

Nurses are burned out and asking for help. It is time for health systems—and legislators—to listen.

Last week, the Pennsylvania House passed the [Patient Safety Act](#), which for the first time would apply minimum staffing standards for nurses in hospitals. HB 106, approved by an impressive 119-84 margin, garnered bipartisan support after years of advocacy by bedside nurses. Now the bill moves to the state senate, where passage remains uncertain, at least in part from hospital industry opposition, but mounting evidence and changing circumstances demand this new approach.

As CEO of Pennsylvania's leading health system and as a leading nurse staffing researcher, we believe safe staffing standards will help to relieve nurse burnout, improve care for patients and create better work environments to attract and retain dedicated frontline caregivers.

Pennsylvania should implement evidence-based safe staffing standards.

Many are familiar with the concept of evidence-based medicine, which uses the best available data to inform decision-making. No piece of legislation is a perfect solution for staffing and burnout challenges, but the evidence supporting minimum nurse-to-patient ratios is clear and compelling.

Over two decades of [research at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Health Outcomes and Policy Research](#) has shown that each additional patient added to a hospital nurse's workload is associated with a 7% or higher risk of a patient death. Hundreds of studies have shown [a host of benefits](#) when nurse staffing ratios are improved: Patients recover more quickly, stay in the hospital for a shorter length of time, and are readmitted less frequently because they receive more attentive care and avoid preventable hospital-acquired conditions.

In addition to the academic evidence—which is substantial—we must also take seriously the firsthand experiences of bedside nurses.

The majority of nurses support minimum nurse-to-patient ratios as established under the Patient Safety Act. Most major organizations representing nurses across the Commonwealth agree. Nurses consistently point to safe staffing as the most important factor in their job satisfaction. A [2022 study](#), undertaken by Penn Nursing colleagues, found that hospitals with better nurse staffing ratios and more favorable work environments experienced significantly less burnout and turnover even under pandemic-era conditions.

From the patient perspective, [a recent Harris Poll](#) shows that 90% of the public favor establishing safe nurse staffing standards for hospitals.

Opposition to the Patient Safety Act has frequently hinged on whether hospitals could comply, especially as the entire industry is under significant financial strain. These concerns are valid and well-meaning, and efforts to apply safe staffing standards statewide should be coupled with initiatives to strengthen Pennsylvania's nursing workforce and ensure the long-term sustainability of hospital care in our communities. We should not be afraid to follow the evidence toward new approaches when the status quo is broken.

An outdated, inadequate reimbursement structure and regulatory framework has left hospitals struggling even as medicine has made unprecedented strides in preventing, diagnosing, and treating diseases. Health care leaders, policymakers, payers, and community partners must work collaboratively to address these issues. Driving change is difficult, but it is imperative that we address the current challenges facing health care in a thoughtful, comprehensive manner.

As Shannan Giambone, R.N., [recently told The Inquirer](#): "If you don't fix the root cause of staffing in the hospital, you are never going to fix the problems that hospitals are facing right now."

She is right. Hospitals face multiple challenges emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. If we do not solve difficulties related to recruiting and retaining nurses, we will prolong a dangerous situation, imperiling patients' well-being, and the long-term financial health of medical organizations.

Nurses kept hospitals afloat during the pandemic, and we rightly called their contributions heroic. Now, we have an opportunity to honor their service by protecting patients, creating better working conditions, and protecting their future.

**Kevin B. Mahoney, MBA, is Chief Executive Officer of the University of Pennsylvania Health System and Senior Fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics (LDI).**

**Linda H. Aiken is professor of nursing and sociology; founding director of the Center for Health Outcomes and Policy Research, and Senior Fellow at LDI.**