Nurses are screaming for help; lawmakers should listen | Opinion

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The Pennsylvania Nurses Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals held a rally on June 26 at the State Capitol in support of the Pennsylvania nurses bill. June 8, 2023. Don Decker/LehighValleyLive.com

BY LINDA ALSKIS

Nurses are burned out and seeking help. It is time for health systems—and legislatures—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 105, approved by an impressive 156-0 margin, guaranteed top-notch support after years of advocacy by bedside nurses. Now this bill moves to the state Senate, where it already gained ground last year, 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 remove the current health care crisis 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 research-based evidence to inform decision-making. No piece of legislation is a perfect solution for staffing and burned-out 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 Leadership and Innovation’s Research Reports have shown that each additional patient added to a hospital’s nurse-to-patient ratio results in a decline of 3% or higher risk of a patient’s death. Hundreds of studies have shown a host of benefits when nurse-staffing ratios are improved. Patients recover more quickly, stay in the hospital fewer days, 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 2020 study undertaken by Penn Nursing colleagues, found that hospitals with better nurse-staffing ratios and more favorable work environments experienced significantly less nurse turnover and turnover even under pandemic era conditions.

From the perspective of one patient: 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 since the entire nursing industry is under significant financial stress. These concerns are valid and well-meant, and efforts to apply safe staffing standards statewide can help to strengthen Pennsylvania’s nursing workforce and ensure the long-term sustainability of this important aspect of our health care system. We should not be afraid to follow the evidence toward new approaches when the status quo is broken.

An outdated, inadequate care environment, work structure, and regulatory framework have left hospitals struggling even as medical care has made unprecedented strides in predicting, diagnosing, and treating diseases. This is why the patient signaling 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 Shannon Glaberman 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. We have no solution difficulties related to nursing and related staffing, injury nurses, and addressing the ongoing situation, impairing patients’ well-being, and the long-term financial health of medical organizations.

Nurses keep hospitals afloat during crises, and we rightly called our contributions heroism. Now, we have an opportunity to honor their service to protect patients, creating better working environments, and preserving the future.

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