

# Executive Summary

Across the nation, hospitals are facing the possibility of the worst health care worker shortage in history. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the demand for nurses will exceed supply by 20 percent, leaving the nation 291,000 nurses short as the baby boom generation hits its golden years. The average age of nurses in 1999 was 42. By 2010, the age will be 45 with 40 percent of nurses 50 years old or older. Nurses are not the only health care professionals in short supply. Nebraska is facing a shortage of health care workers from nurses and pharmacists to dentists and radiology technicians.

Unlike worker shortages in the past, the health care worker shortage of today will not be cyclical and dissipate upon increased enrollment for a few years in health care programs. Nebraska's hospitals and health systems are looking at addressing this issue in both the short and long term. To ensure continued quality health care in Nebraska, NHA will continue to support its members in their efforts to educate, recruit and retain individuals in the health care profession.

The Nebraska Hospital Association (NHA) formed an Issue Strategy Group on Workforce Shortage in Nebraska (ISG) to address the shortage of health care workers in Nebraska. Members of the ISG were charged with developing a plan to retain health care workers already employed in Nebraska hospitals and health systems. Additionally, the ISG strategized plans for recruiting quality workers to fill needed shortages and replace workers entering retirement. Developing educational programs to encourage individuals to become trained in health care professions was also a priority.

The ISG members realized that a "one-size-fits-all" plan for Nebraska would not work. From the small rural hospital to a large metro-hospital, every Nebraska hospital required a plan to attract health care workers that could be adapted to the number of employees needed. Additionally,

not every hospital in Nebraska can afford to provide the types of incentives, bonuses, and salary that may be deemed necessary to attract workers to their hospitals.

Over the course of the year, the ISG discussed the challenges hospitals face in dealing with the workforce shortage. The group concluded that a collaborative effort was required to achieve a successful outcome. During the year, the ISG heard presentations regarding the Rural Health Education Network and the Rural Health Occupations Program through the University of Nebraska Medical Center, the Nebraska Center for Nursing Board, and the Nebraska Community College Association (NCCA). Presentations were given to the University of Nebraska Board of Regents, Creighton University and the NCCA Instructional Officers. Other invited participants included the Nebraska Health Care Association (one member of the ISG), the Nebraska Nurses Association, and the Nebraska Organization of Nurse Executives. The ISG has provided regular updates to the American Hospital Association, the Nebraska Workforce Development Center, members of the Nebraska Legislature, the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce, members of the Governor's Policy Cabinet, the Rural Health Association, the Public Health Association of Nebraska, and to the Nebraska Health and Human Services System.

Identified as a top priority by the ISG, Nebraska's hospitals must work closely with the educational institutions across the state, at all levels. We need to collaborate with colleges and universities to increase enrollment in health care career preparation – while realizing this will result in increased class sizes, as well as adding additional staff to teach the classes and clinical rotations. As an added challenge, the education field is also facing a shortage of educators at all levels of education. Hospitals should inform colleges of the skills expected from hired graduates and encourage colleges to help students meet these expectations. Hospitals can collaborate by providing mentors, clinical sites and instructors, and offering to lend staff members to teach classes, if possible.

Hospitals must also focus their attention to recruiting grade school, junior high school, and high school students. Developing good relationships with high school guidance counselors and math and science teachers are key in attracting young people into health professions. Hospitals need to reach out to members of their own community, developing a “grow your own” mentality. Job fairs and community programs designed to spark the interest of young people for the health care profession is a priority in the ISG workforce plan. Word-of-mouth is often the best advertisement for recruiting new workers, so staff is encouraged to share their positive comments about the hospital with others. These recommendations are on-going endeavors that must be undertaken to effectively recruit future health care workers.

Attracting individuals into the health care profession is essential to addressing the health care workforce shortage. As an incentive, many hospitals and communities are offering scholarships, loan programs and financial assistance to new students who choose a health care profession. Often, with the promise that an individual will return to a particular hospital to work after completing a particular health care program, the hospital will pay that student’s tuition. Hospitals are also offering financial assistance to employees for continuing or advanced educational programs.

NHA is promoting the Rural and Basic Metro Occupation (RAMBO) program as a way to recruit workers into the health care field. Students must meet income requirements to be eligible for the RAMBO program. The RAMBO program provides financial assistance to individuals for training in fields where there are critical worker shortages, (i.e.: health care). As of January 2002, 41 participants will be enrolled in health education programs throughout Nebraska, and will receive financial assistance through RAMBO. Funding for the RAMBO program is provided through the Nebraska Health Care Cash Fund, community college foundations, and other private sources (NHA Research and Education Foundation) developed by the RAMBO Consortium in

conjunction with the college foundations. RAMBO participants are individuals who meet low-income guidelines and who generally receive some form of government assistance. Those who have completed training through the assistance from RAMBO have started and maintained jobs in their local communities. They have proven to be good students and workers. The money for RAMBO participants is distributed statewide.

Many hospitals across Nebraska are implementing creative programs to attract new employees into their organization and community. Incentives such as hire-on bonuses, higher salaries, flexible schedules, no-weekend shifts, and benefits are some of the ways that hospitals are attracting new workers. Generating new programs for employee retention has also been a focus to boost morale and provide a better work environment for current workers. Organizing employee input committees is just one way that hospitals are recognizing the importance of their employees' feedback. Hospitals realize that today's worker wants a good paying job that is satisfying, and yet wants personal time for family. Priorities and work habits are changing, and to be competitive with other labor markets, hospitals must meet the changing work environment. Being the "employer of choice" in a community is important in recruiting and retaining the current workforce.

The NHA conducted an unscientific staffing shortage survey among the members. The findings of that survey are included in this Toolkit. Also included in the Toolkit is the Web address for the Nebraska Center for Nursing Board, which contains statistics and summaries regarding RN, LPN and employer surveys. These surveys show what we already know – that Nebraska is facing a severe shortage of health care workers and will continue to experience shortages for at least the next five years. While not every NHA member participated in the survey, and many could not predict the anticipated needs for the next five years, the results show that NHA and members must work hard to educate, recruit and retain health care workers.

“Best practices” were a continual topic of discussion among the ISG members. Included in the Toolkit are best practices shared by many of the ISG members, as well as examples from other states. We encourage the NHA membership to continue to submit best practice ideas that can be added to the Toolkit on an ongoing basis. Best practices may range from reduction of required paperwork into just one form, to offering on-site car care, to flexible hours, to mentoring programs. By sharing successful strategies, everyone benefits.

Another priority set by the ISG was to continue publicizing the shortage of health care workers. One goal is to make health care workforce shortage a campaign issue during the legislative and gubernatorial elections. It should continue to be a priority with the federal delegation, as well. One success was the passage of LB 468, enacted by the 2001 Nebraska Legislature and will fund \$500,000 in nursing scholarships across Nebraska.

The Nebraska Hospital Association Board approved the NHA Workforce Committee continuation to monitor the health care workforce shortage and to carry out the work plan developed by the ISG. It is important that we advance the progress and collaborative efforts of the ISG, and to educate the public about the severity of this shortage of health care workers. Additionally, the American Hospital Association will be issuing the AHA Commission on Workforce for Hospitals and Health Systems report in April 2002. NHA will provide you with copies of that report as well.