

The Nursing Shortage and its Consequences in Rural Virginia

By Sety Abooli

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Purpose

The national shortage of nurses in the United States (US) predates several years before the novel coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic, but the effects of the pandemic worsened the crisis to a greater degree. Virginia (VA) is among one of the states with the lowest registered nurse (RN) to patient ratio (10.5 RNs to 1,000 patients), and its rural regions suffer disproportionately compared to the more metropolitan areas. This policy brief will explore the statewide nursing shortage with a focus on rural areas and offer insights into the cause of the crisis as well as areas for improvement.

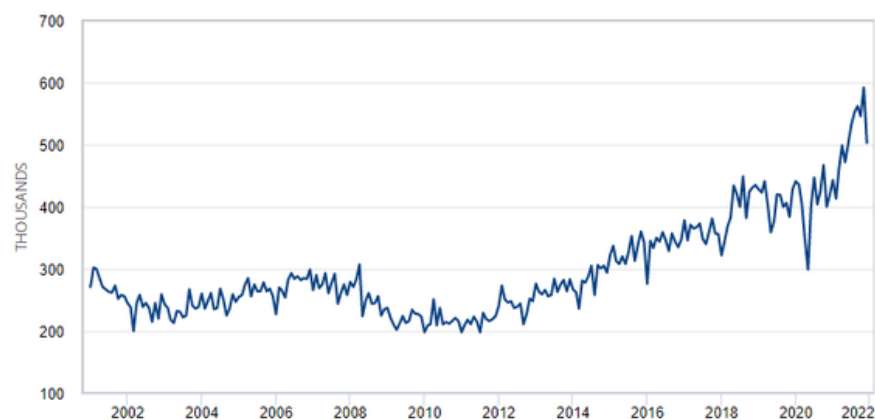
The Nursing Shortage

National Level Data

Research shows that if health care leaders and federal officials do not take action, the US could see a shortage of 450,000 nurses (Kennett, 2022). It is projected that 1.2 million new RNs will be needed in the US by 2030 to address existing shortages (VHHA, 2022). This shortage is especially apparent when analyzing hospital staffing; hospitals employ 105,000 fewer workers today than in February 2020, which is a 2% decrease (Sablik, 2022). The graph below shows the sharp increase in the number of healthcare workers who are leaving their jobs in the past ten years, leading to an overall healthcare workforce shortage.

Health Care Workers Call It Quits

Number of quits for health care and social assistance workers



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey

State Level Data

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) reported that 18% of VA hospitals were critically understaffed (Holmes, 2022). Currently, hospitals in VA are actively recruiting for more than 11,000 posted job openings (VHHA, 2022).

The consequences of an understaffed hospital include longer wait times and higher occupancy rate, both of which decrease the quality of care that patients receive (Holmes, 2022).

A SURVEY OF 800 REGISTERED VA VOTERS SHOWED THAT THE HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IS THE SECOND HIGHEST CONCERN FOR VIRGINIANS (HOLMES, 2022).

Effects in Rural Areas

“Nationally, there were 30 more RNs per 10,000 people in metropolitan cities than nonmetropolitan in 2020 (Sablik, 2022). In a November 2021 survey with 130 rural hospital leaders, just about all respondents reported struggling to fill nursing positions, which affects the hospital’s operations. About half of the survey respondents have had to turn away patients because of a lack of nurses, and 27% of respondents reported terminating certain hospital services because there were simply not enough nurses (The Chartis Group, 2021).

Rural hospitals face disproportionate struggles in terms of recruiting nurses and employing them. They are unable to compete with larger urban hospitals in terms of employee salaries considering they lack the funds, and most of the time are struggling to even stay open. For example, the median rural hospital in 2021 only had 33 days of cash on hand. The rural hospital financial struggle was worsened by COVID-19 since the pandemic scaled back the frequency of outpatient services, which rural hospitals relied on for revenue (Sablik, 2022).

Why is there a shortage?

Pandemic Burnout

One of the biggest reasons for the nursing shortage is the COVID-19 burnout. The number of nurses who have indicated that they are likely to leave patient care has doubled because of burnout from the pandemic.

Educational Obstacles

The American Association of Colleges of Nurses reported that more than 80,000 qualified nursing applicants were turned away in 2020 because of a lack of clinical sites, faculty, and other resources to educate future nurses. Oftentimes, a nurse switching to education means taking a pay cut, so there is not much incentive for nurses to become teachers (Sablik, 2022).

Retirement

In VA, the median age of a RN is 46, and the national average age of a RN is 50, which brings about concerns over a large wave of retirement and a quick decrease in nurses (Sablik, 2022).

Current Initiatives in Virginia

[On Board Virginia](#) is a recruiting campaign website to encourage nurses to work in Virginia through personal narratives, education, and opportunities.

Germanna Community College is working to [expand their nursing training program](#) to streamline more nurses into the workforce, which will address the nurse shortage crisis in their area.

LewisGale Regional Health System in Southwest VA is [partnering](#) with *Galen College of Nursing* to entice the younger generations to want to become nurses.

HCA Virginia, LewisGale's parent company, is [offering \\$800,000 in scholarships](#) for new and current employees pursuing careers at its Southwest VA facilities to support their journey in becoming licensed practical or vocational nurses or RNs within HCA Healthcare.

Virginia Department of Health's [Nursing Preceptor Incentive Program \(NPIP\)](#) provides financial incentives for practitioners who are uncompensated preceptors for APRN students as a way to increase access to care and address the primary care shortage.

Opportunities for Improvement

- *Increase access to education in rural areas.* Developing local education and training for nursing candidates will expand access for those wishing to become a nurse. Additionally, training those who already live in rural areas increase the likelihood of having practicing nurses in rural areas as they will likely stay to work in their hometown.
- *Better workplace conditions for nurses.* In an interview with Beth O'Connor, the executive director of the Virginia Rural Health Association (VRHA), it was revealed that many nurses face abusive treatment, either by the patients or health system, and often leave their shifts with bruises, cuts, or high levels of stress. By providing more protection to nurses in the workplace and ensuring that they get adequate rest and break times, retention rates and the quality of care will improve since the nurses are being treated well.
- *Place limitations on patient load.* Placing a cap on how many patients a single nurse is responsible for will decrease the chances of burnout while increasing the quality of care which patients receive.
- *Increase compensation for nursing educators.* By increasing the salary for nursing educators, more nurses will be able to make the switch from practicing to teaching. With more teachers available, a larger number of nursing students can be accepted and subsequently enter the workforce.

Acknowledgments

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Virginia State Office of Rural Health

“*The Virginia State Office of Rural Health (VA-SORH) was established in 1991 to create, fund, and support quality and sustainable rural healthcare infrastructure throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. The VA-SORH is housed within the Virginia Department of Health, Office of Health Equity, and is the sole organization in Virginia that is federally designated to address and rectify health disparities affecting the state’s rural residents. The mission of the office is to partner with rural communities to identify opportunities and long-term solutions that ensure the health and prosperity of all Virginians. The VA-SORH fulfills this mission through providing technical assistance, regulatory updates, resources, and opportunities for collaboration with communities.*”



For more information, visit us online at: <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/health-equity/division-of-rural-health/> .

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