

**Testimony of the
Greater New York Hospital Association
Before the
New York City Council
Committee on Health**

**New York City's Nursing Shortage:
An Assessment of the Problem and Discussion of Solutions
October 22, 2003**

Good afternoon, I am Terri A. Straub, Vice President for Quality and Patient Safety at the Greater New York Hospital Association, which represents the interests of over 220 hospitals and continuing care facilities in New York City and the surrounding areas. All of our members are either not-for-profit, charitable organizations or publicly sponsored institutions. Together, they provide services that range from state-of-the-art, tertiary care to the most basic primary care consistent with their roles as safety net providers for many of the communities they serve.

The delivery of nursing services is essential to the mission of our members to provide safe, quality health care to their patients, and the current nursing shortage threatens their ability to meet that mission. The Greater New York Hospital Association is thus committed to working with its members to identify opportunities to promote nursing as a career path, increase the capacity of nursing programs to train additional nurses, and to retain the current nursing workforce by advancing its clinical and leadership skills. We therefore welcome the opportunity to appear before you today and commend you on the process you are following to obtain broad input with respect to the critically important issues raised by the nursing shortage.

In order to assist you in this process, I will provide an overview of the shortage, including some of the factors contributing to it, what GNYHA and its members are doing to address the shortage, and what is needed to help us address the problem.

I. The Region's Nursing Shortage

GNYHA Survey of Nurse Staffing in Hospitals—In order to assess the extent of the shortage in the New York City region, GNYHA undertakes surveys of the nurse vacancy and turnover rates in its members at two year intervals. The most recent survey was undertaken in December 2001, and was published in 2002 in a report entitled *Survey of Nurse Staffing in Hospitals in the New York City Region*. The survey requested information regarding vacancy and turnover rates for registered nurses (RNs), licensed practical nurses (LPNs), and nurse aides (NAs) as well as for nurse managers or patient care coordinators, who are not part of the direct care staff. Fifty-nine institutions completed the survey, and the results demonstrate an increase in the turnover rates among all categories of nursing personnel as well as a marked increase in the percentage of hospitals reporting turnover rates of 10% or higher for direct care RNs. The majority of hospitals also reported increased use of all forms of supplemental nurse staffing to cope with the existing vacancies.

I outline some of the key findings of the most recent survey below:

- The overall vacancy rate for the responding members (throughout the region) was 7.8% for direct patient care RNs, but there were higher vacancy rates reported in certain areas such as the Bronx (14%) and Staten Island (10%).
- Thirty-two percent of the hospitals reported vacancy rates of 10% or higher for direct care RNs.

- Turnover rates among direct care RNs, nurse managers, and NAs increased over 2% from the last survey, and turnover rates for LPNs increased by over 4%. Average turnover rates for all four categories of nursing personnel were greater than 10%.
- Over 60% of hospitals were experiencing turnover rates of 10% or higher among direct care RNs, as opposed to only 39% with turnover rates at this level in the prior survey.
- In addition, 55% of hospitals reported turnover rates for nurse managers at 10% or higher as opposed to only 32% in the prior survey (rising to 12% from 7.6% over the prior three years). Some reported turnover rates as high as 25% and above for their nurse managers.
- As in prior surveys, hospitals continued to have the greatest difficulty in recruiting nurses for critical care, perioperative, and emergency care services, with over 50% of responding hospitals taking longer than three months to fill positions in these specialty areas.
- Hospitals continued to use a variety of supplemental staffing strategies, including overtime, in-house per diem nurses, and agency nurses, including travel nurses.
- Over 60% of reporting hospitals felt that the applicant pool had decreased for experienced direct care RNs and for nurse managers.

GNYHA will soon be undertaking its next survey of vacancy and turnover rates and would expect to release the results of that survey in the Spring of 2004.

Factors Contributing to the Nursing Shortage—The causes of the current nursing shortage are different from those of the previous nursing shortages, which were attributed to fluctuations in the economy. The shortage we are currently experiencing stems from a shrinking supply of experienced RNs due to an aging workforce, a lack of younger nurses to replace retiring RNs, and an increasing demand for nursing services due to the aging of the baby boomer population. On this latter point, according to Peter Buerhaus, et al. (*Implications of an Aging Registered Nurse Workforce, JAMA, June 2000*), it is anticipated that 78 million baby boomers are or will soon to be reaching retirement age. At the same time, advances in technology and science are helping to identify and treat more cancer, heart disease, and other degenerative conditions. In addition, baby boomers are viewed as educated and demanding health care consumers. Taken together, these factors lead to an increasing demand for health care services now and into the future. *As a result, it is estimated by Buerhaus that, by 2020, there will be at least 400,000 fewer nurses available to provide care than will be needed.*

Finally, hospitals and nursing homes are competing with other settings for RNs. In the past, the traditional setting for RNs was a hospital or nursing home. Today, there is a high demand for RNs by managed care, home care, physician offices, the pharmaceutical industry, and consulting services, all of which shift nursing resources away from the patient's bedside to what are perceived as less stressful environments.

II. GNYHA's Framework for Addressing the Shortage

To address these problems, GNYHA has worked extensively to support its members' efforts to recruit and retain RNs by providing training and educational materials, identifying grant opportunities, and developing best practices. GNYHA has also created workgroups and hosted forums that permit members to discuss each others' strategies for promoting the nursing profession, recruiting nurses, and retaining the current nursing workforce. The following outlines the forums that have been created for this purpose and the workplans that have been identified.

Nursing Leadership Workgroup—GNYHA has created a Nursing Leadership Workgroup

that comprises a diverse group of nursing leaders from health care institutions and academic settings. The mission of the workgroup is to provide a forum to share best practices and identify a framework of strategies to improve nurse recruitment and retention, including the development of collaborative projects. To address some of the short and long term strategies that have been identified through this process, GNYHA has been providing members with ongoing educational briefings. These briefings have included programs on the Nursing "Magnet" program certification requirements and best practices for achieving Magnet status, the pros and cons of recruiting foreign nurses, and strategies identified nationally as best practices for recruitment and retention of nursing staff.

Nursing Summit—In June 2002, GNYHA held a Nursing Summit to solicit input from providers as well as the deans of nursing programs on the nursing shortage and the role they can play in addressing the problem. The common barrier identified by the academic participants was a shortage of clinical faculty to support increased enrollment in nursing programs. In addition, they noted that the current average age of their faculties is 50 years and older, with very few new nurses entering nursing education.

III. GNYHA's Workplan

Through its Nursing Leadership Workgroup and its Nursing Summit, GNYHA has identified three priority areas for addressing the recruitment and retention of nurses:

- retention of the current nursing workforce;
- promotion of nursing careers among middle and high school students; and
- development of clinical adjunct faculty to facilitate nursing enrollment and clinical education.

The following outlines some of the programs developed to effectuate this workplan.

Retention of Current Nursing Workforce—While much of the focus of the nursing shortage tends to center on the need to recruit RNs, the retention of our existing workforce is an important element of addressing the shortage. Hospitals have had some success in retaining nurses through the creation of financial incentives and flexible scheduling, as well as the empowerment of nurses in decision-making, including providing nurses with representation on leadership committees in the institution. However, some of these initiatives carry significant costs at a time when hospitals can least afford to add to the cost of operations. In addition, while some of these initiatives are successful with senior staff, they are less successful with new graduates who continue to leave nursing positions after a period of only six months. New graduates often report that they leave the profession or a particular position due to a perceived lack of mentoring and support systems. They also indicate they are looking for work re-design (elimination of some the paperwork), technology to support their efforts, loan forgiveness programs for new graduates, and ongoing educational programs. In the midst of an overall nursing shortage, it is often difficult to address some of these concerns.

GNYHA's Nursing Leadership Workgroup has identified that nurse managers play a key role in the retention of RNs in great part because they are on the frontline and have daily contact with the nursing staff. They also have a critical administrative role in the delivery of care, which includes overseeing and mentoring RNs and other direct care staff. While becoming a nurse manager may represent an important career advancement opportunity for RNs, they often do not receive the training necessary to fulfill the multi-faceted responsibilities of this demanding job, which has become even more challenging in recent years. The role requires clinical, educational, management, and leadership skills. Historically, nurses have been trained to achieve clinical skills but are expected to develop other requisite skills through on-the-job

experience. Perhaps, more importantly, the overall nursing shortage often is associated with a shortage of nurse managers. As nurse managers become frustrated by the demands of their job, they are often unable to provide the support necessary for the broader staff of nurses.

In response to this issue, GNYHA is proposing to create a **Nursing Leadership Institute** that would provide nurse managers at member hospitals and long term care facilities with focused training in key managerial areas, such as time management, communication skills, and utilization management. The goals of the Institute would be to:

- Reduce the growing vacancy and turnover rates of nurse managers by improving job satisfaction and providing them with enhanced skills to enable them to perform their jobs more effectively; and
- Provide nurse managers with the skills needed to recruit and retain staff, in turn helping to reduce the turnover and vacancy rates for RNs and other direct care staff working on their units.

GNYHA is currently seeking funding to develop such an Institute, which it believes will play a critical role in addressing the retention of existing nurses.

Development of Clinical Adjunct Faculty—Nursing programs are currently in great need of faculty to support what has become a very welcomed increased demand for nursing education programs. According to a 2002 national survey released by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, it is projected that 784 nurse educators will retire nationwide between 2003 and 2006, and yet only 85 of the more than 2,837 graduates from master's and doctorate programs in 2001 were prepared to be nurse educators. At the same time, it is projected that enrollment in nursing education programs will have to increase immediately by 40 percent to compensate for what is expected to be a national shortage of 400,000 RNs by 2020. Thus, even if we can increase interest in nursing programs to meet the future demands, we do not have sufficient faculty available to teach those new students.

To address this issue, GNYHA was recently funded to develop a pilot project to train portions of our current nursing workforce to become clinical adjunct faculty. This will help increase the number of faculty available, form a partnership between hospitals and academic settings, and develop career ladders for our existing workforce, thereby adding to their job satisfaction.

This project, called the **Nursing Preceptor Training Program**, has been funded by a New York State Health Workforce Retraining Initiative grant and will train 35 RNs in New York City to become certified preceptors or clinical faculty. The goals of the program are to reduce the turnover rates of our current workforce, increase the job satisfaction of new entrants, and, of course, to increase the number of faculty available. The program provides significant career enhancement opportunities for experienced and valuable nurses. It provides them with the skills to help new nurses make the often-difficult transition from classroom to the workplace, thereby hopefully reducing the number of nurses who leave the profession in their first year of work. And, the program helps create a pool of adjunct faculty to help meet the current need for college level nursing instructors. GNYHA hopes to identify and attract additional funding sources so that it can replicate the program across New York City.

Promoting Nursing as a Career in Middle School and High School—In the long run, more individuals need to enroll in nursing schools in order to address the severe shortage that is projected to grow over the next two decades. To accomplish this, hospitals and secondary schools need to develop partnerships so that more students will become familiar with nursing and choose nursing as a career. Applicant pools must be broadened, and nursing as a career must become more attractive. Strategies must be developed to attract individuals who have not

traditionally looked to nursing as a career, such as males and minority populations. Both students and guidance counselors should receive continuous education regarding health careers, including information about the prerequisites for admission to nursing programs, such as math and science. In the end, the goal is to ensure that more students select a career in nursing.

In order to foster increased interest in nursing, GNYHA has developed a **Youth Career Exploration Program**, funded through a WIA Youth Incentive Grant, that provides internships and preceptor programs at area hospitals and long term care facilities for academically qualified, New York City middle school and high school students who are interested in health careers. The goal of the program is to enable students to explore various health careers while at the same time gaining valuable work experience and learning important workplace skills, such as punctuality, communication skills, and proper work attire. Students spend time onsite at facilities, rotating through various departments, such as nursing and physical therapy, and receive a stipend competitive with other age-appropriate jobs. The program is viewed as a promising method for introducing students to health care, and GNYHA is seeking additional funding to replicate and expand this program moving forward.

IV. Need for Funding to Develop and Offer Innovative Programs for Addressing the Nursing Shortage

GNYHA believes that it, together with its members, have identified a number of innovative programs that hold promise for assisting its members retain their existing workforce as well as recruit and educate new nurses. However, each of the programs requires funding and other resources in order to move forward and/or to be offered more broadly. We thus seek your assistance in helping to fund or to identify funding for the programs we have described above: 1) the proposed Nursing Leadership Institute; 2) the Nursing Preceptor Training Program; and 3) the Youth Career Exploration Program. Hopefully, such programs will help to mitigate the shortage we are currently experiencing and that we fear will only worsen with time.

Summary

Unquestionably, there is a critical shortage of nurses as well as faculty needed to educate new nurses. Nurses are a pivotal part of the health care team and are important to the ability of the health care system to deliver safe, high quality patient care for all of us. It is therefore incumbent upon all parts of our community to devote resources to identifying and implementing ways to solve this problem. We at GNYHA, together with our members, have developed a number of workgroups, programs, and strategies to try to address this problem by sharing best practices, providing educational programs, and developing innovative projects to retain our current workforce as well as to increase enrollment in nursing programs. However, many of these initiatives require funding and other resources. We therefore welcome the opportunity to work with the City Council to identify funding sources to develop and implement these programs more broadly.