

ORAL STATEMENT
OF
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PRESIDENT
AMERICAN NURSES ASSOCIATION
HOUSE VETERANS' COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT & INVESTIGATIONS
ON
IMPACT OF THE
NURSE SHORTAGE ON VA HOSPITALS
OCTOBER 2, 2003
334 CANNON BUILDING

MR. CHAIRMAN, MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE, THANK YOU FOR GIVING ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS YOU HERE TODAY REGARDING THE IMPACT ON THE NURSING SHORTAGE ON THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS. I WISH TO SUBMIT MY FULL TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD AND WISH TO HIGHLIGHT SOME OF THE KEY POINTS TODAY.

THE AMERICAN NURSES ASSOCIATION (ANA) IS THE ONLY FULL-SERVICE ASSOCIATION REPRESENTING THE NATION'S REGISTERED NURSES THROUGH ITS 54 CONSTITUENT MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS. WE REPRESENT NURSES IN ALL PRACTICE SETTINGS AND EDUCATIONAL LEVELS.

THE ANA RECOGNIZES THAT THE VETERANS HEALTH ASSOCIATION (VA) IS THE LARGEST EMPLOYER OF REGISTERED NURSES IN THE WORLD AND SERVES AS A MODEL IN THE DELIVERY OF HEALTH CARE WITHIN TODAY'S TIGHT FISCAL ENVIRONMENT.

NURSES ARE THE FOUNDATION OF THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM-PROVIDING PREVENTIVE, ACUTE AND LONG-TERM CARE ACROSS THE LIFESPAN. QUALITY

OF CARE FOR OUR VETERANS WILL NOT IMPROVE WITHOUT NURSES' ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES.

AMERICA IS EXPERIENCING A CRISIS IN NURSE STAFFING. THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS IS EXPERIENCING A SHORTAGE SIMILAR TO NATIONAL TRENDS AND IF THE AVAILABLE SUPPLY OF NURSING PERSONNEL REMAINS CONSTANT, THE ABILITY OF THE VETERANS HEALTH FACILITIES TO MEET THE HEALTH CARE NEEDS OF VETERANS WILL BE ADVERSELY AFFECTED. CONGRESS HAS RECOGNIZED THIS PROBLEM BY ESTABLISHING A NATIONAL COMMISSION ON VA NURSING. THE COMMISSION WILL SUBMIT ITS FINAL REPORT TO THE VA SECRETARY IN MAY OF 2004 WITH SPECIFIC LEGISLATIVE AND ORGANIZATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO ASSURE THE AVAILABILITY OF A QUALIFIED NURSING WORKFORCE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF AMERICA'S VETERANS. THE ANA LOOKS FORWARD TO THE RELEASE OF THIS REPORT AND WORKING WITH THE VA TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS FOR NURSING.

ANA SUPPORTS AN INTEGRATED STATE AND FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE CAMPAIGN TO ADDRESS THE CURRENT AND IMPENDING NURSING SHORTAGE. MANY OF THESE SOLUTIONS ARE DIRECTLY APPLICABLE TO THE VA. WHILE SOME ISSUES REGARDING NURSE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION WERE ADDRESSED WITH THE NURSE REINVESTMENT ACT, MANY ISSUES REMAIN THAT RELATE TO THE RN WORK ENVIRONMENT. I WOULD LIKE TO HIGHLIGHT SOME KEY FUTURE STRATEGIES THAT DEAL DIRECTLY WITH THE NURSE SHORTAGE:

HEALTH & SAFETY

THE ANA CONDUCTED AN ON-LINE HEALTH AND SAFETY SURVEY IN AUGUST 2001. EIGHTY-EIGHT PERCENT (88%) OF THE NURSES' RESPONDENTS REPORTED THAT HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS INFLUENCE THEIR DECISIONS TO CONTINUE WORKING IN THE FIELD OF NURSING AS WELL AS THE KIND OF NURSING THEY CHOOSE TO PERFORM.

JUST A FEW WEEKS AGO, THE ANA LAUNCHED A PROACTIVE, MULTI-FACETED CAMPAIGN AIMED AT PROMOTING SAFE PATIENT HANDLING AND PREVENTING MUSCULOSKELETAL DISORDERS (MSD) AMONG NURSES. THIS CAMPAIGN WILL BEGIN WITH A SAFE PATIENT HANDLING CONFERENCE, TO BE HELD AT THE TAMPA VA'S PATIENT SAFETY CENTER OF INQUIRY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA IN MARCH OF 2004.

OVERTIME

NURSES ACROSS THE NATION ARE EXPRESSING DEEP CONCERN ABOUT THE DRAMATIC INCREASE IN THE USE OF MANDATORY OVERTIME. ANA HEARS THAT OVERTIME IS THE MOST COMMON METHOD FACILITIES ARE USING TO COVER STAFFING GAPS. CONCERNS ABOUT THE USE OF MANDATORY OVERTIME ARE DIRECTLY RELATED TO PATIENT CARE FOR OUR VETERANS. NURSES ARE PLACED IN A UNIQUE SITUATION WHEN CONFRONTED BY THE DEMANDS OF OVERTIME. RNs FACE THE LOSS OF THEIR LICENSE-THEIR CAREERS-THEIR LIVELIHOODS-WHEN CHARGED WITH PATIENT ABANDONMENT.

WITHOUT LEGISLATION, NURSES WILL CONTINUE TO CONFRONT THIS DILEMMA. FEDERAL LAWS AND REGULATIONS SET MAXIMUM HOURS IN THE INTEREST OF PUBLIC SAFETY FOR AIRLINE PILOTS, TRAIN ENGINEERS AND TRUCK DRIVERS. SHOULDN'T WE AFFORD THE SAME PRECAUTION FOR OUR PATIENTS IN OUR VA HOSPITALS?

STAFFING

MANDATORY OVERTIME IS A SYMPTOM OF A LARGER PROBLEM, INAPPROPRIATE NURSE STAFFING. MORE THAN A DECADE OF RESEARCH SHOWS THAT NURSE STAFFING AND SKILL MIX MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE OUTCOMES OF PATIENTS. STUDIES SHOW THAT WHERE THERE ARE MORE

REGISTERED NURSES, THERE ARE LOWER MORTALITY RATES, SHORTER LENGTHS OF STAY, BETTER CARE PLANS, LOWER COSTS AND FEWER COMPLICATIONS.

THE VA, MUCH LIKE PRIVATE HEALTH CARE SYSTEMS, CONTINUES TO STRUGGLE WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF VALID, RELIABLE AND IMPLEMENTABLE NURSE STAFFING GUIDELINES.

ONE DEVELOPMENT REGARDING THE IMPROVEMENT OF NURSES' WORK ENVIRONMENT HAS BEEN THE MAGNET PROGRAM. THE MAGNET PROGRAM HAS HAD A PROVEN SUCCESS IN RAISING THE STANDARDS OF NURSING PRACTICE AND IMPROVING PATIENT OUTCOMES. TODAY, THEY ARE 85 ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE DESIGNATED MAGNET HOSPITALS INCLUDING THE JAMES A. HALEY VETERANS HOSPITAL IN TAMPA, FL.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A MAGNET FACILITY INCLUDE:

- STRONG ADMINISTRATIVE AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR NURSING PRACTICE
- ADEQUATE NURSE STAFFING
- STRONG NURSE-PHYSICIAN COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS
- NURSE AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY
- CONTROL OVER NURSING PRACTICE AND PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT
- PARAMOUNT FOCUS ON THE PATIENT AND PATIENTS' FAMILY

MAGNET HOSPITALS ARE LIVING EVIDENCE THAT CREATING PROFESSIONAL NURSING PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT IS THE SOLUTION TO THE FLIGHT OF NURSES FROM HOSPITAL PRACTICE.

EDUCATION

THE VA HAS BEEN A LEADER IN PROVIDING NURSES THE INCENTIVE AND OPPORTUNITY TO ADVANCE THEIR EDUCATION AND IMPROVE PATIENT CARE.

THE VA HAS COMMITTED SIGNIFICANT RESOURCES TO NURSES SEEKING TO ADVANCE TO THEIR NEXT LEVEL OF THEIR NURSING CAREER. THE ANA HAS ALWAYS MAINTAINED THAT NURSES HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING AND WORKS TO MAKE HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE TO BOTH NEW STUDENTS AND PRACTICING NURSES.

IN CONCLUSION MR. CHAIRMAN, THE VA HAS CHANGED IN ITS DELIVERY OF HEALTH CARE, AND I AM PROUD TO SAY THAT THE VA NURSES HAVE ADOPTED NEW ROLES FOR MEETING THESE CHANGING NEEDS. FOR THE VA TO REMAIN AN “EMPLOYER OF CHOICE” IT MUST CONTINUE TO RECOGNIZE THE PROFESSIONALISM OF NURSES AND THEIR COMMITMENT TO QUALITY PATIENT CARE.

THANK YOU, MR. CHAIRMAN. I WOULD BE HAPPY TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS THAT YOU MAY HAVE.

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