

Legislative Issue Brief

H.R. 2123 - Legislation to Ensure Appropriate Acute Care Staffing

ISSUE: Providing enough nurses at the bedside is the most reliable and cost-effective way to ensure high-quality care which protects both patient and staff and decrease preventable hospital deaths. Unfortunately, a severe staff nurse shortage exists in our country. A 2002 report by the Health Resources and Services Administration states that by 2020, hospitals will be short 808,416 RNs. In a 2002 survey by the United American Nurses, three out of every ten nurses said it was unlikely they would be a hospital staff nurse in five years. Studies have shown that hospital staffing levels are too low to provide safe and effective care. In fact, patients in hospitals with the highest number of patients for each staff nurse, have a greater risk of dying.¹

Polling reveals that the public is behind us.² An overwhelming number of Americans believe there are not enough registered nurses to care for the number of patients admitted in hospitals. Three-quarters (75 percent) say there are not enough registered nurses, while only 15 percent say there are enough. Additionally, three-quarters of Americans believe the shortage of registered nurses in hospitals has a large impact on the quality of care provided to hospital patients. Three-quarters of the public say that the nurse staffing shortage has a huge or big impact on the quality of care provided to patients (42 percent huge, 34 percent big).

The factor in the nurse staffing shortage is high patient to nurse ratios. A 2002 study by Linda Aiken found that higher emotional exhaustion and greater job dissatisfaction in nurses were strongly associated with higher patient-to-nurse ratios: each additional patient per nurse corresponds to a 23% increased risk of burnout, as well as a 15% increase in the risk of job dissatisfaction. 43% of nurses, reporting job burnout and dissatisfaction intend to leave their current position within the next 12 months; only 11% of nurses satisfied with their position intend to leave within 12 months. The Aiken study also linked high patient to nurse ratios to medical errors and poorer patient outcomes. The study found that for each additional patient over four in an RN's workload, the risk of death increased by 7% for hospital patients. Patients in hospital with eight patients per nurse have a 31% higher risk of dying than those in hospitals with four patients per nurse.

To address the nurse staffing crisis and increase patient safety, the UAN supports the enactment of federal mandated minimum safe registered nurse-to-patient ratios to protect patients and staff.

STATUS: On May 3, 2007, Representative Janice Schakowsky (D-IL) introduced the “**Nurse Staffing Standards for Patient Safety and Quality Care Act of 2007**” (H.R. 2123). This legislation would establish federally mandated minimum safe registered nurse-to-patient ratios to protect patients and staff. The Schakowsky legislation would provide the following minimum direct-care registered nurse-to-patient ratios:

¹ Linda H. Aiken, PhD, RN et al., *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 288, No. 16, October 23-30, 2002.

- 1 nurse to 1 patient in operating room and trauma emergency units;
- 1 nurse to 2 patients in all critical care units, including emergency critical care and all intensive care units, labor and delivery units and postanesthesia units;
- 1 nurse to 3 patients in antepartum, emergency room, pediatrics, step-down, and telemetry units;
- 1 nurse to 4 patients in intermediate care nursery, medical/surgical and acute care psychiatric units;
- 1 nurse to 5 patients in rehabilitation units; and
- 1 nurse to 5 patients in postpartum (3 couplets) and well-baby nursery units.

ACTION

NEEDED: The UAN strongly urges members of Congress to support federally mandated minimum safe registered nurse-to-patient ratios. Specifically, the UAN requests members of Congress to contact Representative Janice Schakowsky's office and agree to be a cosponsor of this legislation.

POLICY

RATIONALE:

- Studies have shown that hospital staffing levels are too low to provide safe and effective care. In fact, patients in hospitals with the highest number of patients for each staff nurse, have a greater risk of dying. In her landmark study on nurse-to-patient ratios, Linda Aiken concludes, "In hospitals with high patient-to-nurse ratios, surgical patients experienced higher risk-adjusted 30-day mortality and failure-to-rescue rates, and nurses are more likely to experience burn-out and job dissatisfaction."
- A 2002 report by the Health Resources and Services Administration states that by 2020, hospitals will be short 808,416 RNs.
- In a 2002 survey by the United American Nurses, three out of every ten nurses said it was unlikely they would be a hospital staff nurse in five years.
- Studies show that nurses return to nursing when safe staffing ratios are implemented. In 2000, the Australian state of Victoria implemented staffing ratios as part of a strategy to recruit and retain nurses in their state and met with remarkable success.
 - Six months after the ratios were fully implemented, 3,300 nurses returned to work full-time in the Victoria's hospitals.
 - One of the premier technical institutes in Victoria reported that the number of students planning to study nursing increased by 144% since the staffing ratios were implemented.
- California is experiencing more interest in nursing since passing nurse ratio legislation in 1999.
 - The number of RNs increased by 4% from June 2001 to June 2002 and the number of certifying exams applicants rose by 18%.
 - Kaiser Permanente voluntarily enacted ratios before the California law went into effect in July 2001. As a result, the Northern California branch of Kaiser hired 71% more new nurses and the number of nurses quitting declined by 47% from January to October 2002, net increase in RNs of 570% over the previous year.
- In a 2002 survey by the United American Nurses, 85% of nurses felt that reduced nurse-to-patient-ratios would help solve the nursing shortage.