



A Union of Professionals

American Federation of Teachers' Healthcare Staffing Shortage Task Force Report Executive Summary

November 2022

In response to rising patient loads and record numbers of healthcare professionals leaving their jobs, delegates to the American Federation of Teachers' biennial national convention in July 2022 passed a pointed resolution, "[Addressing Staffing Shortages in the Healthcare Workforce](#)." This resolution called for the convening of a national task force composed of local leaders and frontline members, and that task force produced the following report.

Our nation's healthcare facilities were dangerously understaffed prior to the pandemic. Today's staffing crisis is really a shortage of staff willing to endure the current working conditions, and it's a crisis of the healthcare industries' own making.

The report finds that the staffing crisis in our nation's healthcare facilities is not some mysterious, intractable problem we lack the tools to fix. Rather, given all that the nation's healthcare workforce has endured during the pandemic and before, it was a completely predictable crisis. And with a commitment from healthcare employers to put patients and their workforce above maximizing revenue, it is correctable. The report includes a menu of strategies that can be used to improve our nation's healthcare facilities and offers concrete examples of where they have been successfully used. It is intended to help frame the national discussion about the staffing crisis and to provide a road map to fixing the chronic problem.

As the report concludes: Healthcare workers saw the staffing crisis coming.

Healthcare workers, unions and advocates have been warning of a staffing shortage for years, long before COVID-19 entered the picture. We must address how we got here if we are going to recruit the next generation of healthcare workers. Fighting for better working conditions now isn't just about current healthcare workers; it's about the future of healthcare.

Several factors are driving the staffing crisis, including:

- **The corporatization of healthcare and profit motives led to a systematic underinvestment in healthcare workers' safety and well-being, creating unsustainable work environments.**
 - Healthcare workers are facing increased mandatory overtime and on-call hours, creating unstable and unsustainable work schedules.
 - Healthcare workers are five times more likely to experience workplace violence than other workers.¹
 - 1 in 4 healthcare workers showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder in May 2020.²
- **Nursing education programs are understaffed, underfunded and costly.**
 - In 2019, nursing programs turned away more than 80,000 qualified applicants because the programs lacked the necessary faculty, facilities or funding.³
 - Even if a student secures a spot in a Bachelor of Science in nursing program, they can expect an average of \$23,711 in student loan debt.⁴
 - There is a nurse faculty shortage driven in part by low pay for these roles compared with other roles in clinical settings available to nurses with advanced degrees. With an average monthly loan payment of \$544, many qualified nurses cannot afford to take a pay cut.⁵

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Fedrick C. Ingram
SECRETARY-TREASURER

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EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

■ **The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the staffing crisis.**

- Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 1 in 5 (18 percent) of healthcare workers have quit their jobs. And for healthcare workers who have stayed in their jobs, nearly 1 in 3 (31 percent) have considered leaving.⁶
- Between 2020 and 2021, the total number of registered nurses in the workforce declined for the first time in more than five years. This included a loss of 100,000 RNs under the age of 44, highlighting the loss of early and midcareer professionals.⁷

This is a crisis for patient safety.

- When healthcare workers are assigned more patients than they can safely care for, patient safety suffers.
- Adding just one additional patient to a nurse's workload results in a 7 percent increased risk of a patient dying within 30 days of hospital admission,⁸ a 48 percent increased risk of a child being readmitted to the hospital within 30 days,⁹ and increased risk of infection.¹⁰

Proven strategies—at the national, state, sector and facility levels—can address this crisis, including:

- Improving recruitment (and diversity in the workforce), with strategies like high school career and technical programs, apprenticeships and nursing bridge programs.
- Expanding targeted financial aid and loan repayment programs, including the National Health Service Corps and the Nurse Faculty Loan Program.
- Enacting federal and state laws mandating safe staffing ratios for the whole care team, putting safe staffing requirements into governmental regulations, and negotiating safe staffing levels in collective bargaining agreements.
- Banning mandatory overtime through a wide-ranging approach: federal and state legislation, regulation and collective bargaining agreements.
- Pushing Congress to pass the federal Workplace Violence Prevention for Health Care and Social Service Workers Act and working with state legislatures on greater safety protections.
- Pushing for pandemic protections in federal law, such as an Occupational Safety and Health Administration standard and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services emergency preparedness rule.
- Advocating for funding and programs to support health professionals' mental health.
- Working at the federal and state levels to increase oversight of mergers and acquisitions in the healthcare industry, including the impact on patient care.
- Making shared governance part of collective bargaining agreements—like the partnership between Kaiser Permanente and the Oregon Federation Nurses and Health Professionals and other unions.
- And last but not far from least, championing the right of healthcare workers to form unions, and fighting employer union-busting tactics.

Endnotes

¹U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: <https://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/foi/workplace-violence-healthcare-2018.htm>

²Yale School of Medicine: <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/burnout-alcohol-ptsd-health-workers-are-suffering/>

³American Association of Colleges of Nursing: <https://www.aacnursing.org/news-information/fact-sheets/nursing-faculty-shortage>

⁴Nerd Wallet analysis of 2019 federal student aid data from U.S. Department of Education: <https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/loans/student-loans/average-nursing-student-debt>

⁵Nerd Wallet analysis of 2019 federal student aid data from U.S. Department of Education: <https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/loans/student-loans/average-nursing-student-debt>

⁶Morning Consult: <https://morningconsult.com/2021/10/04/health-care-workers-series-part-2-workforce/>

⁷U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020, 2021: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

⁸Aiken et al., 2014: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4035380/pdf/nihms571000.pdf>

⁹Tubbs-Coolley et al., 2013: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3756461/pdf/bmjqs-2012-001610.pdf>

¹⁰Cimiotti et al., 2012: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3509207/pdf/nihms387953.pdf>