



47595 Watkins Island Square
Sterling, VA 20165
Phone: (703) 444-5587
Fax: (703) 444-5597
www.vanurse.org

STATEMENT OF SHARON JOHNSON, MSN, RN-BC
PRESIDENT
NURSES ORGANIZATION OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (NOVA)
BEFORE THE VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEES ON HEALTH
AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITH RESPECT TO

Draft Legislation to Improve the Authority of the Secretary of VA to Hire and Retain Physicians and other Employees of the VA

WASHINGTON, D.C.

March 16, 2016

Chairman Benishek, Chairman Wenstrup, and Members of the Subcommittees on Health and Economic Opportunity, on behalf of the nearly 3,000 members of the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs (NOVA), I would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on today's draft legislation to Improve the Authority of the Secretary of VA to Hire and Retain Physicians and other Employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

NOVA is a professional non-profit organization for registered nurses employed by the VA.

NOVA appreciates the opportunity to provide our input and, as nurses who make up one third of the VA workforce, we will highlight areas of concern that are pertinent to our mission.

While overall we appreciate the intent of the bill and support any activities that will improve how VHA hires, retains and recruits its workforce, the bill as written, does very little to affect nursing personnel and the staffing shortages being felt nationwide.

For example, Section 2, paragraph 4 states that the Medical Director should be a doctor or other qualifying medical professional. NOVA believes that this minimizes the expertise of those professionals who are trained in healthcare and administration and limits flexibility in hiring within these leadership positions.

Section 2 (7) (D) for clarification, mention is made of “Advanced Degree in Mental Health” and line 18 has Nursing Assistant. Nursing Assistants have no degrees and perhaps this was inserted in error.

Section 3 - Adjustment of Hours Authorized for Certain Full-Time Employees of VHA implies that any hours can be worked to meet the biweekly pay period of 80 hours with a cap at 2,080 in a calendar year. NOVA has concerns that payroll and human resources systems will not be able to manage this change unless IT software is rebooted and HR staff is trained to meet this change.

NOVA applauds Section 5, which would clarify staffing shortages and include clinical as well as non-clinical personnel as needed.

NOVA has no comments on Sections 6 through 9 of the Draft Bill.

Section 10 - Reemployment of Former Employees.

While NOVA appreciates the need to recapture former employees to help with staffing shortages within VA, for RN appointments, the grade is based on the *Nurse Qualification Standards* so the employed candidates would need to meet those standards. The scope is different for each grade. A reemployed candidate may not meet the qualifications for the next higher grade. And while it may be competitive, it could also be inequitable for those already employed using qualification standards under the accepted service position.

Section 11- Recruiting Database.

It is unclear to us how a national data base will work and what the expectation is. Problems often arise with national databases unless there is a short time period that applicants remain “active (i.e. 30 or 60 days) within the system and effective management of the database is provided. Good candidates would be scooped up quickly or will get other offers outside VA. For positions identified as mission critical, there should be greater pay flexibility built in to be competitive and attract candidates to those positions. For example, if an engineer or HR Specialist is a mission critical occupation and there are no hiring flexibilities, it will not help if they leave to go to other agencies or the private sector for more pay or higher grades.

Section 12 – Hiring Academy.

Retention of HR Specialists is of concern to NOVA. While an HR Academy is a noble idea, unless the workload and ineffective systems under HR are addressed, a high vacancy rate and ongoing retention issues will continue to be a concern. We also add that there should be something more specific that defines the appropriate training milieu based on the complexity of HR, such as face to face training when needed, and ensuring funds for travel are appropriated to continue providing effective training for all HR staff.

Section 13 – Promotional Opportunities for Technical Experts.

NOVA applauds this section and recognizes that technical experts need to be able to obtain promotions without having to leave their roles and pursue a managerial position.

Section 14 – Comptroller General Study on Succession Planning. NOVA has no issues with this section.

Section 15 – Information on Hiring Effectiveness.

We appreciate a system to track use and impact of hiring authorities and flexibilities. NOVA has already testified that there is a knowledge gap in hiring authorities and flexibilities within HR. We also applaud the inclusion of a process for tracking satisfaction and timeliness of the hiring process.

Section 16 – Employment of Students and recent Graduates.

NOVA supports the allowance of excepted service appointments and recent graduates. NOVA is an advocate of staff developmental opportunities such as internships and residency programs.

Finally, *Section 17* looks to standardize the process for exit interview surveys, which is critical in measuring and identifying any common themes so that action could be taken as well as assisting in identifying opportunities for improving the workforce environment within VA.

In summary, NOVA supports all efforts directed towards the retention, as well as recruitment for the VHA's largest workforce. Reviewing and enhancing nurse pay to be competitive with community and private sector standards; removing the cap from nurse pay scales to enable current employees to apply for critical leadership positions and increased support with monies for travel and education for nursing staff would go a long way in enhancing the VA as the employer of choice for healthcare professionals across the nation.

Staffing methodology should be the accepted and supported mechanism for all facilities that VACO supports to determine nurse staffing, as well as having the Chief Nursing Officer at the table when patient care decisions and planning is made.

Once again, NOVA thanks the Committees for the opportunity to submit testimony and we would be happy to assist with adding language in the bill to accommodate and revise any of the issues mentioned in our testimony.

Statement on Receipt of Grants or Contract Funds: Neither Ms. Sharon Johnson, nor the organization she represents, the **Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs (NOVA)**, has received federal grant or contract funds relevant to the subject matter of this testimony during the current or past two fiscal years.