



STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEES ON HEALTH & OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

WITH RESPECT TO

VHA Recruitment and Retention: Is Bureaucracy Holding Back a Quality Workforce?

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Chairman Miller-Meeks, and Kiggans, Ranking Members Brownley and Mirvan and Members of the Subcommittees; on behalf of the nearly 3,000 members of the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs (NOVA), thank you for allowing us an opportunity to present our views on today's topic -VHA Recruitment and Retention: Is Bureaucracy Holding Back a Quality Workforce?

NOVA is a professional organization for nurses employed by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA). The opinions provided here are not that of the VA, but of our members who are nurse managers, frontline and specialty healthcare professionals taking care of Veterans at facilities around the country.

I want to begin by thanking the Committee for its support of the VA workforce and its work on several legislative packages that have provided the VA with various tools needed to address hiring and retention. Congressional authorities like those found in the *RAISE Act* which removed the executive level caps on pay and mandated salary surveys at each VA facility to ensure pay is competitive with local private sector healthcare professionals.

We also applaud Title IX of the *PACT Act* which included provisions that provide a broad range of pay flexibility to help VHA to recruit and retain quality candidates. New authorities include modification on pay caps for certain employees, expansion of recruitment and retention bonuses, awards, special rates of pay, and student loan repayment – our understanding is that VHA has encouraged use of these incentives which will help improve hiring in rural areas and other critical clinical operations staff.

It may be too soon to see if these will be effective in aiding recruitment and retention efforts, we believe they can and will help. We would also like to note that although the authorities are generous, challenges remain as hiring delays and length of time to onboard remains high.

If there is one major bureaucratic challenge to emphasize, it is that the VHA hiring process is antiquated and non-competitive. The Office of Personnel Management rules are constrictive and not reflective of today's labor market.

Most importantly, an issue that NOVA has highlighted in its *2023 Legislative Priority Goals* is HR Modernization – which reorganized and centralized Human Resources away from the facility level. It remains a system that separates the staffing specialists from their customers. Without knowledge of the facility and its needs, hiring managers and others are left to do the legwork which pulls them away from their more critical clinical duties. Our members have reported that nurse leaders are being required to assume the duties of HR to fill vacancies, leaving gaps in clinical care.

It is our understanding that there is supposed to be a HR leader working at every facility that helps serve as a liaison between the virtual (centralized) HR and medical center, but severe shortages among HR staff, particularly HR Specialists who are responsible for helping recruit/retain, and onboard employees has led to an inability to provide quick responses or timely turnaround in many aspects of the hiring process.

The time it takes to hire and onboard often leads to qualified candidates taking other positions outside the VHA system.

As of May 2023 - national vacancy rates for HR positions are 20.1%.

One of NOVA's members is a nurse recruiter and offered this – “HR is turning over their HR specialists at an alarming rate resulting in HR staff who are inexperienced and handling workload amounts that are far beyond their ability due to staffing shortages. Bottlenecks in hiring occur during transitional periods between hiring more staffing specialists, realigning workload, and the frequent change on hiring processes. Due to this, oftentimes tentative job offers do not get out to the selected candidates for weeks or months causing a stall in the entire hiring process.”

VA continues to struggle to hire robust HR staff that are trained in all phases of the hiring process, to include the use of locality pay, and all congressional authorities. To be able to manage its hiring needs, VA must combat the high vacancy and turnover of HR specialists and ensure they have the proper training and FTE to be able to anticipate hiring increases of its healthcare workforce.

The private sector can often tender an offer on the day of an interview. VA takes months to extend offers. They will not and cannot begin to compete when the hiring goal is 120 days.

During the pandemic, VA employed expedited hiring practices which allowed for more timely application and quicker onboarding – VA was able to hire within weeks rather than months.

NOVA believes a comprehensive review of these processes should be considered, studied, and used to increase efficiency and speed of the hiring process.

Additionally, the VHA workforce needs major reform regarding pay. In many areas of the country, VA cannot compete with private sector wages. Again, we acknowledge the RAISE Act, but it did little to alleviate compressed pay for frontline nurses. The immediate pay affected only APRNs, PAs and RNs whose salaries were at the prior pay cap of \$173,300. Fair and equitable pay is mandatory in the current market of healthcare shortages that is predicted to be a global health emergency by 2030. VA must be able to compete with the private sector to maintain safe staffing levels and provide the highest quality of care for Veterans.

Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) and Nursing Assistants (NAs) remain one of the highest challenges to recruit as salaries in the community have increased in part due to the demand for staff during and after the pandemic. They are utilized in an increased variety of settings to include nursing homes, CBOCs, and medical centers. VHA continues to live within qualification standards that prohibit the hiring of qualified NAs – change is needed to allow individuals who have been NAs for years but because they lack a college level education cannot be hired.

Nationally (May 2023) NAs are showing the highest vacancy levels, sitting at 22.7% with LPNs right behind at 18.3%. RNs are at a 15.5 vacancy rate (*VHA vacancy rate trend 5/1/23.*)

NOVA members report that a balance of competitive pay and scheduling flexibility is necessary for work-life balance and in recruiting top candidates. The pandemic highlighted elevated levels of burnout and mental stress - more nurses are asking for schedules that accommodate their home needs. To accommodate some of these needs, VA could provide staff the ability to work as a 0.9 FTE and receive full time benefits, which aligns with how many private sector systems pay their nurses, 36 hours = FT; working 36 hours per week will reduce burnout, retain nurses, and allow the flexibility needed for work-life balance.

Having the flexibility of 72/80 hours in a pay period could be a great tool to use for recruitment and retention and give VA a tool often offered in private sector healthcare systems.

This would require a legislative change to VA Payroll regulations.

NOVA has made suggestions on other legislative fixes that may provide relief and a pathway to recruiting and retaining a stronger nursing workforce.

Provide funding to allow for additional nursing residencies. VA has done a phenomenal job of implementing residency programs for RNs which has served as a pipeline to transition nursing students to independent practicing RNs to fill vacancies. It's vital that VA have dedicated funding to increase the number of new graduate RNs and expanded funding for specialty areas, many that are predicted to be particularly problematic in the future based on projected losses - for example if an Operating Room (OR) has all senior staff predicted to retire in the next 1-5 years it would be beneficial to start an OR specific residency for succession planning purposes at that facility. Dedicated funding would allow for hiring transition to practice (TTP) nurses outside of vacant funded positions; meaning they could cross-train and rotate throughout the facility during their residency program.

Offer continuing education reimbursement for all nursing staff. NOVA thanks Subcommittee on Health Ranking Member Julia Brownley for reintroducing the *Department of Veterans Affairs Continuing Professional Education Modernization Act*. Our members strongly support providing continuing education reimbursement to all levels of nursing. Currently only Physicians receive a CE stipend to maintain their training and education requirements for licensure. The lack of parity hurts morale and harms recruitment and retention. We urge Congress to support and pass the bill as it would be another useful recruiting tool to offer those interested in working at VA.

Require salary market analysis and transparent reporting annually to VHA leadership and Congress.

This will ensure that every facility performs an annual market survey and acts on the results. It will allow for comparison to private sector salaries and encourage increases if funding is available, especially in high-cost areas where shortages of healthcare professionals remain.

As the only professional nursing organization that supports the VA nursing workforce, we continue to monitor the Department's progress in developing staffing models and position descriptions for each VHA occupation. We want to advise that an expedited VA concurrence process for Handbooks and Policies that require approval takes too long - average turnaround time is 18 months from initiation to concurrence. An example of this is the dissolution of the Nurse Professional Standard Boards (NPSB) which if concurred with, would require less documentation and the ability to hire in a more expedited fashion as the dimensions of practice would be eliminated. This speaks to the bigger problem of just how long change takes to occur and the hoops, like paperwork delays, that need to be jumped through at VA.

VA must be able to recruit and retain a valuable workforce without barriers to hiring that impede their ability to compete with other healthcare systems. A strong workforce is at the heart of ensuring that our nation's Veterans can continue to receive the highest quality of care they have earned and deserve. NOVA remains committed to providing that care.

Thank you for allowing us to provide our thoughts on today's important topic. We look forward to working with the Committee to meet the challenges facing VA's workforce so that we can continue to provide timely, high quality compassionate care now and into the future.

We are happy to answer any questions you may have now and as you continue to discuss VA's healthcare workforce recruitment and retention challenges.

NOVA is a nationwide, nonprofit professional organization whose members are nurses working for the Department of Veterans' Affairs Medical Centers and Clinics. NOVA is not part of the VHA, nor is NOVA sanctioned or endorsed by the VHA.