### THE ROLE OF NURSES IN HEALTH CARE

Nurses are key members of the health care team. They provide care in all health care environments including public health, schools, primary care, prisons, home health, long-term care facilities, hospitals, and many other settings. As patients, we have been cared for by nurses, who "through long-term monitoring of patients' behavior and knowledge-based expertise... take an all-encompassing view of a patient's wellbeing".[1] Licensed practical nurses (LPNs), registered nurses (RNs), and advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) serve in a variety of roles and represent a range of educational levels from diploma to doctoral degrees. This report focuses on challenges facing the LPN and RN workforce in North Carolina.

### CHALLENGES MEETING THE DEMAND FOR NURSING WORKFORCE

Long-term models show a growing challenge in meeting the demand for nursing workforce in North Carolina. NC Nursecast, a nurse workforce model developed by the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research in partnership with the North Carolina Board of Nursing, projects the supply and demand of LPNs and RNs in different settings through 2033 and can depict changes in supply based on different scenarios. Baseline projections show a 27% shortfall in LPN supply by 2033, with the largest shortfall of 49% appearing in long-term care settings like nursing homes and assisted living facilities.[2] Without any changes in trends from baseline projections, there will be an 11% shortfall in RN supply by 2033.[2] The greatest gap is in hospitals, with a potential 17% shortfall in supply.

### DRIVERS OF SUPPLY CHALLENGES IN THE NURSING WORKFORCE

Data on position vacancies, turnover, and future gaps in supply and demand show significant challenges facing the nursing workforce and our health care system. News headlines warn of the dire consequences of mental health challenges that nurses face, such as burnout, overload, moral distress, and dissatisfaction. While the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, they were endemic prior to the pandemic. Other challenges facing the nursing profession include:

- **Shortage of nursing educators**
- **Stressful work environments**
- **Insufficient staffing**
- **Trauma and burnout compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic**

### NCIOM TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF THE NURSING WORKFORCE

With the clear challenges facing the nursing workforce and the anticipation of future challenges with meeting the demand for nurses in our state, the North Carolina Institute of Medicine (NCIOM) launched the Task Force on the Future of the Nursing Workforce in February 2023 to develop recommendations to support the development and retention of the LPN and RN workforce into the future.

The task force was supported by funding from The Duke Endowment, the North Carolina Pandemic Recovery Office, and AARP North Carolina. The task force discussed a variety of issues related to the nursing workforce, including education, career progression, workplace environment, and how health care payment models impact the workforce. Between February 2023 and January 2024, the full task force met seven times and five work groups met three times.

The task force was co-chaired by Dr. Ernest Grant, PhD, RN, FAAN, Immediate Past President, American Nurses Association, Interim Vice Dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Duke University School of Nursing; Dr. Catherine Sevier, DrPH, MSN, RN, President Emerita, AARP NC; and Hugh Tilson, Jr., JD, MPH, Director, NC AHEC. They helped guide 11 steering committee members, over 50 task force members, and over 120 work group members through insightful conversations that led to the creation of the recommendations in this report.

Recommendations from the task force are described in Chapters 2–4 of this report.

### DEVELOPING FUTURE NURSES

Recommendations in Chapter 2 focus on strengthening and developing pathways to nursing education, ensuring adequate supply of nursing faculty and clinical instructors, increasing collaboration between nursing programs and employers, improving graduation rates for nursing programs, and ensuring inclusive environments and curriculum.

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## RECOMMENDATION #1

**Develop a strong and diverse nursing workforce that is representative of the communities served and is prepared to meet the growing health care needs of North Carolinians**

**Strategy 1:** Expand early pathways to develop a nursing workforce that is representative of the population of North Carolina

**Strategy 2:** Increase nursing program collaboration, sharing of best practices, and connections with employers

**Strategy 3:** Increase the number of North Carolinians graduating with nursing degrees by addressing faculty shortages

**Strategy 4:** Improve retention and graduation rates of nursing students by supporting economic and material needs and enhancing academic supports

**Strategy 5:** Enhance the preparation of nursing students through more inclusive educational environments and curriculum

**NURSING CAREER PROGRESSION AND RETENTION**

Recommendations in Chapter 3 focus on ensuring that nurses have opportunities for success, development, and leadership from the start of their career to late career, and on creating a workplace culture and environment that supports overall well-being.

## RECOMMENDATION #2

**Enhance the educational and career advancement of nurses through all stages of their careers, particularly those serving in practice environments experiencing persistent shortage (e.g., hospital, long-term care, underserved, and rural settings)**

**Strategy 6:** Strengthen transition to practice and early career development for nursing students and new graduates across all care delivery settings

**Strategy 7:** Identify opportunities for nurses to participate in educational advancement, leadership, mentoring, and preceptorship

**Strategy 8:** Strengthen opportunities and incentives for later-career nurses to participate in mentor and preceptor roles

## RECOMMENDATION #3

**Ensure a workplace culture that values the physical and psychological safety and well-being of nurses**

**Strategy 9:** Create and promote a supportive and inclusive workplace culture

**Strategy 10:** Protect nurses from violence in the workplace

**Strategy 11:** Increase awareness and support for the mental health of nurses

**Strategy 12:** Evaluate the current state of efforts to address equity in the nursing workforce

## RECOMMENDATION #4

**Expand the role of nurses in leadership, shared decision-making, and team communication**

**Strategy 13:** Create robust systems that involve nurses as leaders in decision-making that impacts their work environment, patients, and the interprofessional team

**Strategy 14:** Improve communication and understanding within interprofessional care teams

## RECOMMENDATION #5

**Improve retention of nurses in practice environments with high rates of turnover or vacancies by addressing work environment issues such as workloads and offering flexibility in scheduling**

**Strategy 15:** Expand opportunities for non-traditional employment schedules and settings and increase family-friendly workplace policies

**Strategy 16:** Decrease the experience of high workload and documentation burden for nurses

**Strategy 17:** Retain nurses in North Carolina and incentivize practice in needed roles and rural areas

**VALUING NURSES AND NURSING CARE**

Recommendations in Chapter 4 focus on raising awareness and support for the needs of nurses, quantifying the value of the care they provide, and identifying ways that payment for care can support the nursing workforce.

## RECOMMENDATION #6

**Equip nurses and the public to be strong advocates for nursing and health care improvement**

**Strategy 18:** Enhance the ability of nurses to advocate for themselves and their profession

**Strategy 19:** Enhance the ability of the public to advocate for nurses

## RECOMMENDATION #7

**Quantify the value of nursing care**

**Strategy 20:** Use value-based payment and develop mechanisms to quantify the importance of nursing in quality care

**Strategy 21:** Explore opportunities for nurses related to National Provider Identifier (NPI) numbers

## RECOMMENDATION #8

**Optimize payment for health care services
to support nursing care**

**_Strategy 22:_** Increase funding to support school nursing

**_Strategy 23:_** Use funding mechanisms to support the long-term care nursing workforce

**_Strategy 24:_** Promote RN billing in primary care

**_Strategy 25:_** Expand the state budget in key shortage areas for nursing care

### MOVING FORWARD

The recommendations put forth by the NCIOM Task Force on the Future of the Nursing Workforce represent the initial step in a much-needed, ongoing dialogue and action. For these recommendations to lead to tangible outcomes, sustained effort, collaboration, and investment from all relevant parties are vital.

The task force's call to action extends beyond the confines of this report; it is a call to continually reevaluate, adapt, and innovate in response to the evolving health care landscape and the changing needs of the nursing workforce. The journey toward a more robust, representative, and well-supported nursing workforce in North Carolina is ongoing, requiring persistent advocacy, strategic investment, and a collective commitment to the principles of equity and excellence in nursing education and practice. The future of health care in North Carolina hinges on our ability to heed these recommendations, adapt to emerging challenges, and seize opportunities to elevate the nursing profession for the benefit of all its residents.

### REFERENCES

1. What is Nursing? Your Questions Answered | ANA. Accessed March 25, 2024. https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/workforce/what-is-nursing/

2. Supply & Demand Model - NC Nursing Supply & Demand. Accessed March 25, 2024. https://ncnursecast.unc.edu/model/