



Strategy 15

Expand opportunities for non-traditional employment schedules and settings and increase family-friendly workplace policies

Strategy 15.1 Employers of nurses should:

- Adopt innovative scheduling, contract, and role opportunities.
- Expand virtual nursing opportunities by conducting a thorough review of nursing roles and offering virtual nursing positions if appropriate to the setting.
- Implement family-friendly workplace policies.
- Provide options and flexibility for nurses to cross-train for multiple roles if that is their preference.

Desired Result

Nurses will have more flexibility and choice in their work hours and environment and higher rates of retention.

Why does the task force recommend this strategy?

Implementing flexible work schedules, non-traditional employment settings, and family-friendly workplace policies can address the diverse needs and life circumstances of nurses, helping them balance work with personal responsibilities and reduce stress and burnout. Offering options like flexible hours, telehealth roles, and support for family commitments underscores an employer's commitment to staff well-being. Such supportive environments lead to a more engaged, productive nursing workforce, which is essential for high-quality patient care and the sustainability of health care services. By recognizing and accommodating the multifaceted lives of nurses, employers can ensure a resilient health care sector that is equipped to meet the challenges of modern care delivery.

Context

Retention of nurses within the profession requires a multifaceted approach because of the complex interplay of factors influencing nurses' decisions to stay in their roles or leave the profession altogether. Scheduling practices and workplace policies both play important roles in these decisions and must be examined and adjusted at the organizational level to promote nurse retention. A 2022 survey found that nurses rated work-life balance as the most important factor influencing work satisfaction.⁷⁸

DEMOGRAPHICS AFFECTING DEMAND FOR INNOVATIVE WORK OPPORTUNITIES AND FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING

The nursing workforce, primarily comprised of women, faces a critical need for family-friendly policies and more flexible schedules. A recent survey of health care and education employees found that women were 54% more likely than men to report that child care responsibilities impacted their ability to work.⁷⁹ Across industries, over 50% of women report having to reduce their working hours or say that they haven't been able to give 100% at work.⁸⁰

Despite family responsibilities posing barriers to work for some nurses, significant numbers of working caregivers are counted among the workforce:

- According to census data, more working mothers are employed as registered nurses than in any other profession.⁸¹

- Nearly 43% of nurses are parents to children aged 17 and under, and a growing number are responsible for the care of aging family members at home.⁸²
- In a 2022, 47% of nurses who were not currently working cited family and home responsibilities as their reason for being unemployed.⁸³

Flexible workplace policies are crucial for attracting and retaining nurses, including those without caregiving responsibilities. The option to take advantage of family-friendly benefits should not be limited to nurses with children. Younger generations entering the nursing profession have heightened expectations for flexibility and work-life balance and are more likely to rate these characteristics as key factors influencing job satisfaction.⁸⁴

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-American Nurses Foundation Survey, 2022. <https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/work-environment/health-safety/disaster-preparedness/coronavirus/what-you-need-to-know/covid-19-survey-series-anf-2022-workplace-survey/>

EXAMPLES OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORKPLACE POLICIES

- Child Care Assistance** - Offer on-site or nearby child care and/or child care subsidies as a benefit option for nursing staff. For nurses working long hours, finding child care can be difficult. Offering assistance can help nurses access quality child care options and help alleviate some of the financial burden of rising child care costs.
- Paid Family and Medical Leave** - Allow workers the option to take a set amount of time away from work for the "worker's own serious, longer-term health condition, to care for a family member with a serious health condition, or to care for or bond with a new child, and for reasons related to a family's member's military service".⁸⁵ Paid Family and Medical Leave is often covered through insurance contributions from the employer and/or employee. In North Carolina, state employees are eligible for four to eight weeks of paid parental leave after a birth, adoption, or foster child placement.⁸⁶ This leave does not cover time to care for sick or injured family members.
- Support for Family Caregivers** - Provide resources and support for nurses who are caregivers for aging parents, spouses, or other family members. This may include access to counseling services, caregiver support groups, and information about community resources and respite care options.

CHAPTER 3 - DEVELOPING, SUSTAINING, AND RETAINING NURSES IN THEIR CAREERS

- 4. **Lactation Support** - Ensure that breastfeeding nurses are supported with access to lactation rooms, storage facilities for lactation pumps and breast milk, and adequate time to pump during their shifts as they return to work.

Spotlight on North Carolina

The North Carolina Healthcare Association (NCHA) and its members are actively working in this space. NCHA has partnered with TOOTRIS as an option for offering child care benefits with low administrative burden.

Atrium Health is completely overhauling its child care offerings to better cater to employee needs.

-NCHA, TOOTRIS. https://www.ncha.org/strategic_partners/tootris/

EXAMPLES OF INNOVATIVE SCHEDULING, CONTRACT, AND ROLE OPPORTUNITIES

A variety of creative options for scheduling, contracts, and roles have been implemented across the health sector. Some options may not align with safe patient care in certain settings; however, pilot tests across the country have demonstrated the feasibility of several of these opportunities.

- **Non-traditional shift lengths** - In some workplaces, simply offering 4-, 6-, 8-, and 10-hour shifts is possible. In others, traditional shifts may be split to accommodate those looking for shorter hours (for instance, a 12-hour shift could be split 4/8 or 6/6).
 - *Example: "Parent shifts" – Cleveland Clinic program offering shorter nursing shifts during the school day⁸⁷*
 - *Example: 4-hour "morning commute shift" – offered to bypass rush hour and minimize commute time in high-traffic cities⁸⁸*
- **Flexible start times** - Several staggered start times for employees to choose from, such as shifts that run 7-7, 11-11, or 3-3. These may benefit nurses with morning or evening family responsibilities or those with difficult commutes during rush hours.
 - *Example: Commonly seen in emergency departments and as a benefit for nursing management positions*
- **Flexible contract options** - Opportunity to choose a contract with defined periods of time off to address family/caregiving responsibilities.
 - *Example: Contract with built-in time off that aligns with local school system's seasonal breaks*

- **Job-sharing** - Divides job responsibilities and benefits (salary, paid time off, etc.) between two individuals (typically 50/50 or 60/40). Job sharers must communicate well and should divide roles to take advantage of personal strengths.
 - *Example: Most commonly seen at the managerial level or in education*

VIRTUAL NURSING

Some nurses seeking more flexibility or a nursing role that is less physically demanding may be well suited to becoming virtual nurses. Virtual nursing involves delivering nursing services remotely through digital platforms and technology-enabled communication methods. Virtual nurses may communicate with patients in their homes through telehealth or support bedside nurses in inpatient units. Virtual nurses can perform duties that do not require hands-on access, such as patient monitoring, admission interviews, answering patient and family questions, and providing medication education and discharge teaching. While in-person mentoring and preceptorship cannot and should not be replaced, virtual nurses—particularly those familiar with a unit—can also serve as mentors and answer questions that come up for newer nurses during their shift. Sharing these responsibilities can free up time for on-site nurses to perform in-person tasks like patient assessments and medication administration.

CROSS-TRAINING AND DUAL-ROLE OPPORTUNITIES

While some employees may be looking for flexibility in shift timing or structure, others may seek flexibility in nursing roles with opportunities for professional growth while remaining in their job. Cross-training can give nurses the opportunity to learn protocols for patient care in other facilities/units after a designated period of employment. This opportunity should be optional but may appeal to nurses looking to pick up overtime shifts or try a new specialty.

Dual-role opportunities are similar in that they allow nurses to continue part-time on their unit while formally contracting part-time in another clinical area or role such as education, administration, research, or leadership. One program that oriented interested ICU nurses to work one shift a week in the emergency department found that those functioning in the dual role had reduced reports of burnout, decreased intent to leave, and higher job satisfaction overall.⁸⁹

KEY RESOURCE NEEDS



Associations representing employers of nurses can help employers identify and implement options for flexible scheduling and family-friendly workplace practices by:

- Identifying and/or developing and promoting resources that help employers learn about best practices from their peers and research.
- Identifying technical assistance and funding opportunities to support employers that are safety net organizations or otherwise lower-resourced in their efforts to increase employee flexibility.