

Satisfaction Up, Numbers Down

Rural Public Health Nurses Needed

By Sandra Cole, Karen Ouzts, and Mary Beth Stepan

Wyoming and other rural states face a critical shortage of public health nurses. This could hurt the public health system's ability to respond to emergencies and safeguard the public's health unless we develop systematic, evidence-based recruitment and retention efforts.

Overall, rural communities find recruitment and retention of nurses challenging because of lower compensation, lack of trained and qualified public health nurses locally, and difficulty in recruitment of nurses from more urban settings. An additional concern is that our rural and frontier areas generally experience a lack of registered nurses prepared with baccalaureate degrees. In order to respond to future public health challenges, efforts to recruit, train and retain public health nurses (PHNs) must take priority now. The Wyoming Department of Employment projects that large numbers of PHNs will retire within the next five years.

Job satisfaction is intimately related to successful recruitment and retention, and we conducted a recent study that highlights the job factors that nurses find most satisfying. Our findings can be integrated into recruitment campaigns. PHNs frequently cite great working environment, autonomy, and work hours as reasons they remain in their positions. Measuring nurse satisfaction is a way to evaluate retention efforts of PHNs. Our study found high levels of job satisfaction among Wyoming's PHN managers and staff nurses. We used a job satisfaction survey that measured 12 categories: achievement, communication, influence, interpersonal relationships, job importance, job mechanics/competencies, job security, organizational policies, recognition, salary and benefits, supervision, and working conditions.

Autonomy, working relationships, and shared decision-making are common indicators of nurse satisfaction across health care settings. More importantly, these factors contribute to quality patient care. Autonomy, self-governance, and relationships of nursing staff also inform the journey hospital systems take toward earning Magnet Certification. Magnet certification directly relates to nursing satisfaction, innovations in professional nursing practice, and quality patient care (www.nursecredentialing.org). Public health nurses are some of the most satisfied nurses in Wyoming, according to a recent study by the Wyoming Department of Employment, where the same factors of autonomy of practice, satisfying working relationships, and shared governance were found. This could explain the longevity of PHNs in Wyoming and why it is important to consider satisfaction as critical to any recruitment and retention efforts.

We found that both staff nurses and managers were satisfied in their positions overall. In the subcategories of "influence" and "interpersonal relationships," managers were less satisfied than the staff nurses. This finding is consistent with other researchers who indicate that power or influence is important for effective patient care and for satisfaction among staff members. This finding supports the idea that management should evaluate nurses' responsibility versus authority to determine whether a disparity exists. Efforts to increase shared governance will increase satisfaction. Efforts to solicit managers' participation in the process of considering and implementing program changes will also increase nurses' feelings of power and influence. Because public health nurses frequently understand the problems in their own communities, their perceptions should be built into program development.

Rural communities are experiencing a critical shortage of qualified public health nurses, and this shortage will affect the way agencies can mobilize to combat public health emergencies. An evidence-based approach should guide recruitment and retention efforts. Our study provides an example of how systematic evaluation of job satisfaction can lead to ways of improving the job satisfaction of public health managers in the realm of influence and interpersonal relationships. ■



Suzanne Gillette administers free blood pressure checks in a church basement as a community health nurse.

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