

Nursing shortage persists in NC, despite recent improvements

Jaymie Baxley
NC Health News

Though North Carolina still has far fewer nurses than it needs, incremental gains have been made in addressing the shortage.

That was the key takeaway from an analysis released Sept. 15 by the NC Health Talent Alliance, a public-private partnership of the NC Center on the Workforce for Health, the NC Chamber Foundation and the state's network of Area Health Education Centers.

Emily McCarthy, a senior policy analyst for the NC Center on the Workforce for Health, said the group's analysis is based on data from a survey of 110 health care organizations that provided information on nearly 80,000 nursing positions at more than 1,560 facilities across the state.

The data showed roughly a third of the state's positions for licensed practical nurses, who provide basic medical care under the supervision of registered nurses and physicians, are vacant.

That's worse than last year, when about a quarter of LPN positions were unfilled.

Registered nurses, who make up the largest segment of North Carolina's nursing workforce and provide more advanced patient care (such as administering medications, coordinating treatment plans and supervising LPNs and nursing assistants) are also in short supply.

About 13% of the state's registered nurse positions are unfilled. While higher than the national average of a 10 percent vacancy rate, the number is an improvement over last year's rate of about 17 percent.

But Andy MacCracken, director of the center, said the improved rate comes with a caveat.

He said persistent shortages among LPNs and other support staff create additional pressures on registered nurses, a dynamic that has ripple effects throughout the health care system.

"We know that RNs rely heavily on the full care team, and when we don't have allied health professionals and LPNs at sufficient staffing levels, RNs have to take on a whole lot of extra duties and responsibilities," MacCracken said in an interview with NC Health News. "That contributes to untenable situations where we see folks either leave the employer or leave the profession overall, and that's not good for anyone."

Long shifts and heavy workloads

There are several factors driving the nursing shortage.

Low pay is a major concern, particularly in rural parts of the state. A workforce needs assessment commissioned last year by the North Carolina Healthcare Association, the umbrella organization representing the state's hospital systems, noted that many rural health care systems and hospitals "cannot match rising wages offered by more urban healthcare systems and robust wage growth in the broader private sector."

Difficult working conditions are another factor. In addition to long shifts and heavy workloads, nurses are often subject to verbal and physical abuse from patients.

Forty-eight percent of respondents in a 2022 survey conducted by the North Carolina Nurses Association said they had "personally witnessed violence" at work in the past two years. Twenty-seven percent reported being victims of violence.

The state's staffing woes are not new.

Lawmakers in the N.C. General Assembly have been aware of the problem for decades; they passed legislation acknowledging a "nursing shortage in the state" back in 1989.

And, MacCracken said, the issue existed even before then.

"We've identified a nursing shortage in North Carolina for close to half a century," he said. "So as we are tackling these issues, we know that there's an ebb and flow to what the shortage looks like and the nature of what might be driving the shortage."

The challenge, he added, is "making sure that there's sustained focus on where we need to go next."

Vincent Ginski, director of workforce competitiveness for the NC Chamber Foundation, said that's partly the purpose of the alliance's analysis — the second produced by the partnership since its founding in 2023.

"While anecdotal evidence of staffing challenges has existed for years, the survey — combined with complementary secondary data — offers a more detailed and contextualized picture of workforce needs across the state," he said in a news release. "We're using this to develop regional strategies to address workforce needs since they vary greatly across the state."

Signs of progress

During a webinar unveiling the new data, McCarthy said the state had seen an uptick in "educational output."

The number of newly licensed registered nurses with bachelor's and associate degrees has increased nearly 15 percent in three years. That growth has helped drive a 10.6 percent rise in the overall supply of licensed registered nurses during the past five years, with almost half of that increase occurring in the last year alone.

That increase will be needed, given that a 2023 survey conducted by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing found that the median age of nurses nationwide is 46 years, and more than a quarter of RNs said they planned to retire or leave nursing in the coming five years.

For licensed practical nurses, the pipeline has also improved, with educational output climbing about 13 percent in the past three years. Still, the state's total number of LPNs is about 4 percent lower than it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members of the alliance believe the rising number of graduates can be attributed to increased public and private investments in nursing programs.

Melissa Smith, senior state director of health science programs for the North Carolina Community College System, noted that the General Assembly appropriated \$55 million in 2023 to expand programs in nursing and "other critical shortage fields" at all 58 of the state's community colleges. About 44 percent of those funds have gone to colleges in rural counties, she said.

"They have seen great growth," Smith said of the schools, adding that the money has created a "spark of excitement" among their students and staff. "As I've visited some of the colleges, it's like, 'We've got this whole new lab, and we would have never been able to afford this [without the legislative funding].'"

Jaymie Baxley is an award-winning reporter covering rural health and Medicaid for NC Health News. A lifelong North Carolinian, he previously worked at The Robesonian, The Pilot in Moore County and The Daily Courier in Rutherford County. Reach him at jbaxley@northcarolinahealthnews.org



UNC Health Southeastern

Provider recruitment key to health system sustainment and community enhancements

Amanda Crabtree
For The Robesonian

LUMBERTON — Since 2023, UNC Health Southeastern has worked diligently to recruit more than 75 physicians and advanced practice providers to support the health system and health needs of our community.

Business Development Director Betsy Wilson leads the effort, along with support from UNC Network Physician Recruiter Cindy Leonard.

"Recruitment is such an important part of the process in ensuring our patients and community are well taken care of," said Wilson. "Finding the right providers is crucial, and the recruitment process is the first step."

According to the 2018 American Medical Association Economic Impact Study, each physician in North Carolina supports an average of 12 direct and indirect jobs, \$2.1 million in direct and indirect economic output, and \$83,044 in state and local tax revenue.

"Most of the providers recruited are now to the region and contribute many, many millions to economic output and tax revenues," said Leonard. "The success of our physician and APP recruitment result in economic improvement to our community and allows UNC Health Southeastern to continually invest in improving the health and wellness of Robeson County."

Economic impacts of recruitment have far-reaching impacts on local communities and towns served by the health system.

"A robust recruitment program of specialists by our local health-care system positively impacts the economy of our city as well as our region," said Lumberton Mayor Bruce Davis. "Having access to specialists in fields like orthopedics and women's health services enables our citizens to

remain close to home for their healthcare needs. Highly trained doctors and advanced practice practitioners are a major factor when families and individuals make a decision about where they want to live, and we want them to choose Lumberton to sustain our economy and stability in the region."

Leonard handles the first step of the recruitment process by finding the candidates and vetting

them. Once she has identified a potential candidate, she informs Wilson to gauge our interest. Next, the candidate is contacted to set up a phone interview with the local team, including

Chief Medical Officer Dr. Joe Roberts. If the process goes smoothly and the candidate is deemed a good fit, a site visit is planned.

The process can take anywhere from six to 24 months, depending on the specialty, demand, and how soon an individual is able to relocate.

According to Wilson, some of the most positive aspects of our community and health system that appeal to potential providers is the friendliness of our teammates and community, as well as the team atmosphere. The partnership with UNC Health is also a positive for tentative candidates for recruitment.

"Close proximity to the beach is also a selling point, as well as the weather," added Wilson.

Specialists are an important part of recruitment in order to maintain local access for patients. UNC Health Southeastern's recruitment team has focused on key areas including orthopedics, obstetrics and gynecology, as well as general surgery to continue to support the health systems growing programs.

The health system's orthopedics program has grown to include foot and hand specialists, as well as physicians who specialize in sports medicine and pain. The sports medicine program supports community sports,

including the Lumberton Football Club, which provides soccer programming for youth of all ages. High school and college level athletes are also supported through the athletic trainer program with the Public School of Robeson County and, most recently, collaborating with Robeson Community College as their exclusive provider for sports medicine for their new baseball program and their upcoming softball program.

In late 2024, the health system unveiled a \$32 million women's health center on the medical center campus, which offers women and infants highly technical and robust facilities and services. The general surgery program is also expanding with recruitment of two bariatric surgeons to enhance the surgery practice.

"Specialists are some of the most challenging, but also rewarding parts of recruitment," added Leonard. "Our team is proud of the high caliber physicians and supporting providers that have joined Southeastern's panel of providers, as well as many who are now in the process of joining the local medical community."

Recruiting this high number of specialists for Robeson County and surrounding community takes a collaborative approach that is a continuous process to maintain needed specialists at a certain level.

"The collaboration with other departments is something of which I am most proud," said Wilson.

"Anytime I reach out to any department with a request regarding a site visit for a candidate, everyone is more than willing to do their part to ensure a smooth visit. Our team at UNC Health Southeastern understands what it takes to recruit good providers, and it shows."

Administration also understands the importance of recruitment, meeting with candidates during the site visits and assisting with any needed follow-up.

"All the small incremental work being done by more than 2,000 team members across our collective enterprises is what is propelling

our improvements in quality metrics, employee satisfaction, fiscal status, and patient satisfaction," added UNC Health Southeastern President and CEO Chris Ellington. "As a result of all these efforts and much more, our health system is more attractive than ever from a recruitment standpoint."

Providers interested in opportunities with UNC Health Southeastern and UNC Physicians Network may contact Leonard at cindy.leonard@unchealth.unc.edu for more information on available opportunities. For an online provider directory for your community, visit unchealth.org/care-services/doctors or unchealth.org/care-services/doctors and enter your location.

Amanda L. Crabtree is the director of marketing & public relations at UNC Health Southeastern. Reach her by email at amanda.crabtree@unchealth.unc.edu.



Wilson



Leonard



Ellington



Davis

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