

Hospital Staffing Plans in Washington State

The 2023 Washington State Legislature directed WSIPP to systematically describe staffing plans submitted to the Department of Health (DOH) by hospitals throughout the state in terms of timeliness, completeness, format, and maximum patient-to-care staff ratios. WSIPP was also tasked with reviewing professional guidance and other states' policies on hospital staffing.

Background

Adequate staffing of nursing staff in hospitals, such as registered nurses (RNs) and certified nursing assistants (CNAs), is important in preventing adverse patient outcomes and nurse burnout and turnover. RCW 70.41.420 requires most hospitals in Washington to form staffing committees and draft annual staffing plans to ensure patient needs are met. Though plans have been required since 2008, they have never been systematically reviewed.

Findings

Professional nursing organizations tend to favor fixed patient-to-nurse ratios, whereas hospital associations favor flexible decision-making in the short run. Our review of staffing plans revealed the following:

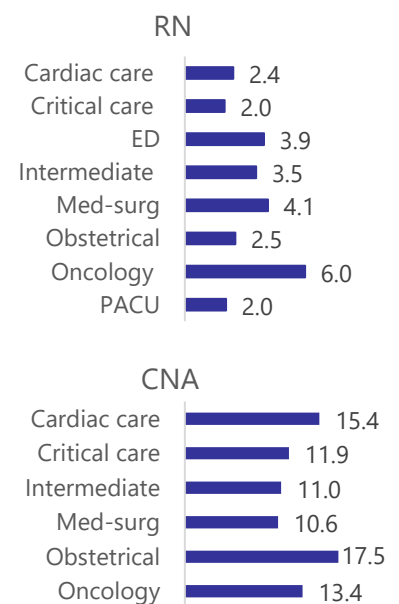
- 75% of staffing plans between 2019 and 2023 were submitted to DOH on time.
- Patient-to-RN ratios tend to be lowest in units where the most involved or life-saving care is administered, such as critical and post-anesthesia care and during labor and birth.
- Patient-to-CNA ratios are generally higher than patient-to-RN ratios. CNA ratios are lower in rural areas than in urban areas, suggesting greater dependence on CNAs in rural areas.

Washington is one of 16 states that require staffing plans, staffing committees, or maximum patient-to-nursing staff ratios.

Limitations

Our analysis of staffing plans only describes *planned* staffing by hospitals. We are not able to comment on *actual* staffing patterns in hospitals in the state. We cannot assess the completeness of staffing plans due to a lack of data on how hospital units change over time.

Average Patient-to-Nursing Staff Ratios in Selected Units



Assignment Details

Assigned in 2023 Legislative Session
[E2SSB 5236](#), Sponsor: Sen. Robinson

[Full report available on WSIPP's website](#)

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