

Policy Maker Interview Report
CENTRAL VALLEY NURSING WORKFORCE DIVERSITY INITIATIVE
A project of the Hospital Council of Northern and Central California
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Background

California is facing a nursing shortage crisis. To address this issue, the California Endowment developed a three-year strategy by targeting underrepresented groups of Californians in nursing training and career development. In March 2002, the Central Valley was selected to participate in this initiative. The program was designed to trigger regional infrastructure development and capacity to address nursing work force diversity and shortage issues over the long-term. The Central Valley program was headed by the Hospital Council with key participation by the California Healthcare Association, the Association of California Nurse Leaders, and the Fresno Health Consumer Center.

The initiative objectives included “identifying and educating decision makers, including legislators, about policy options that result in nursing work force diversification and increased opportunities for underrepresented and economically disadvantaged constituencies to enter the nursing field.” In order to identify whether the Central Valley program was able to increase awareness among key policy decision-makers, interviews were conducted with representatives of state legislative offices representing the Central Valley and key committee’s that would address nursing workforce issues.

Methods

Legislators were identified who represented the Central Valley and/or were Chairs of key committees which hear nursing workforce legislation. Calls were placed to the identified offices and inquiries were made as to who the current staff member is who handled nursing workforce legislation. Once the staff person was identified and located, the purpose for the call was discussed and agreement to participate in a short survey was achieved. Notes were taken by hand during the interviews. The following questions were asked of each individual who participated in the interviews.

- 1) How much of a priority is Nursing Workforce Issues for the California Legislature this year?
- 2) What are the barriers to implementing policies which might be effective in increasing the nursing workforce?
- 3) How important do you think Nursing Workforce Diversity is?

Limitations

Due to the recent turnover of staff in most of the offices contacted, individuals who participated in the interviews were, for the most part, new to their position and this issue. Most of those who participated in the study were not involved in nursing workforce issues prior to this current legislative year. The interviews, therefore, focused on their understanding of current policy considerations and barriers regarding nursing workforce

issues, and specific understanding of nursing workforce diversity, rather than evaluating past policy advocacy efforts.

Interview Participants

Cynthia Leon, Health Staffer, Assemblymember Parra (D)

Adam Wood, Health Staffer, Assemblymember Dave Cogdill. (R)

Karen Lange, Health Staffer, Assemblymember Bill Maze (R)

Adrienne Dominguez, Health Staffer, Senator Dean Florez (D)

Debra Gonzalez, Health Staffer, Assemblymember Charles Poochigian (R)

Teri Boughten, Consultant, Assembly Health, Assemblymember Chan (D)

Findings

Five out of six staff interviewed were very aware of the nursing shortage in California, considered it a priority policy issue, and discussed specific policy solutions. Some of the policy solutions being considered this year include:

- 1) Increasing nursing faculty salaries,
- 2) Increasing distance learning opportunities,
- 3) Increasing partnerships between Community Colleges and Hospitals to increase the number of students being admitted to Community Colleges in nursing programs and increasing the number graduating from nursing programs,
- 4) Raising the admissions criteria at Community Colleges to ensure students who are accepted have the kind of educational background that might ensure a higher graduation rate,
- 5) Amending the Federal Workforce Initiative,
- 6) Streamlining OSHPOD to ensure healthcare workforce tracking ability.

The widespread media and industry reports of a nursing shortage in California as well as the legal fight over the implementation of the nurse/patient ratio law were cited by most interviewees as major drivers for the policy agenda. One interviewee spoke of the importance of a continuum approach to the issue of nursing workforce issues – getting K-12 kids interested in science and medicine and then making sure more slots are available in college nursing programs, and then making sure the industry pays higher salaries and creates better jobs to retain nurses. This continuum, however, is considered costly and not politically feasible in today's budget problems.

The primary barrier to achieving policy solutions to the nursing workforce issues is the lack of general funds in the state to pay for costly initiatives. Other barriers cited by those interviewed include the lack of cooperation between Community Colleges and Hospitals and the independence of Community Colleges to set their own admissions criteria (most of whom use a lottery system for selecting students).

In general, diversity issues were not broadly understood nor supported by the staff members interviewed. Only two staff persons felt strongly (both from Democratic offices) that the issue of diversity in the nursing workforce was an important health care issue for minority communities. Other staff members interviewed felt that the overall shortage of nurses was so great that focusing on diversity was not as important by

comparison or that the issue of diversity would be dealt with automatically by increasing the total number of nursing education slots in schools.

All of those interviewed, except one very new staff member, were very aware of the particular nursing shortages in the Central Valley.

Discussion

The nursing shortage in California is high on the agenda of policy makers in California which creates both an opportunity and a barrier to addressing the issue of diversity within the nursing workforce. There will continue to be many policy solutions proposed over the next few years to address the nursing shortage in California. This leaves open the possibility that nursing diversity policy solutions can be seen in conjunction with other ways to increase the total pool of nurses in California. On the other hand, the severity of the shortage is so great that issues like diversity can be seen as secondary and may not receive the receptivity that it deserves.

Nursing workforce diversity policy advocates might consider continuing to highlight and address both the importance of a diverse nursing workforce as well as the ways that diversity initiatives can increase the overall pool of nurses.