

# The North Carolina Area Health Education Centers' Role in Addressing Nursing Workforce Issues

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## Introduction

The need for nurses at all levels of the healthcare system continues to grow at a pace that outstrips the current supply, both nationally and in North Carolina. The report of the North Carolina Institute of Medicine Task Force clearly documents the multiple strategies that will be required to address this highly complex problem. We must increase the output of nurses from our educational institutions, although that alone will not solve the problem. We must improve the retention of nurses in the profession by strengthening the work environment, empowering nurses as decision makers, recognizing outstanding performance, and fostering career growth opportunities. We must also attract young people and second career professionals into nursing that represent the rich diversity of the North Carolina population.

For over 30 years the North Carolina AHEC Program has worked in close collaboration with academic nursing programs, employers, and practicing nurses to prepare and retain a nursing workforce that can meet the healthcare needs of our state and our communities. We remain committed to developing innovative approaches to improving the recruitment, retention, and quality of the nursing workforce. AHEC nursing faculty work with the NC Center for Nursing, the NC Board of Nursing, the NC Nurses Association, and a wide variety of nursing groups to maximize efforts.

## Core AHEC Nursing Initiatives

### Promoting Careers in Nursing

To prepare a more diverse healthcare workforce, the AHEC Program conducts programs to recruit underrepresented and disadvantaged middle and high school students into health

careers. AHECs work annually with over 25,000 young people in order to inform them of opportunities in the health field, including nursing. These programs offer mentoring, hands-on experiences in clinical settings, and also include academic work to strengthen students' skills in math, science, and communication, so that they can succeed in entering and completing nursing programs.

### Nursing Student Training in AHECs

Education of nursing students takes place in a variety of healthcare institutions, agencies, and educational settings throughout AHEC regions, and, whenever possible, in underserved rural and urban areas with vulnerable populations. Essential clinical training for primary care nurse practitioners (NPs) and nurse midwives is provided under the auspices of the

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Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Offices of Regional Primary Care Education. Last year 2,551 student weeks of community-based experiences for NP students were supported through AHEC.

### Continuing Education

Continuing Education (CE) plays a major role in professional career development. The state's nine AHECs offer a variety of nursing CE programs and technical assistance services to address changing technology, clinical guidelines, patient safety, new medications, specialized nursing care, physical assessment, transition from acute care to home, and long-term care.

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Spanish language and cultural competency training programs help nurses work more effectively with our growing Latino population. Last year, AHEC offered 650 nursing continuing education programs, attended by more than 16,750 nurses. The NC Institute of Medicine (NC IOM) Task Force Report on the NC Nursing Workforce points to the fact that nurse retention in workplace settings is increased with progressive management practices, when nurses feel empowered in the decisions that are made, and when education is valued. AHEC continuing education programs teach nurses to become effective managers, a fundamental element in workforce retention.

## Special Legislative Initiatives

In 1989, the NC General Assembly allocated funding to the NCAHEC Program for three initiatives: nurse refresher programs, educational mobility programs, and clinical site development.

### Nurse Refresher Program

The AHEC Program collaborates with UNC-Chapel Hill to offer a refresher program for registered nurses. The course, which includes self-study modules and preceptored clinical experiences, helps registered nurses who have not been employed return to the workplace. Additionally, nurses who are currently employed but would like to move into new clinical areas may also use the program to update their knowledge and skills. Over the last 13 years, approximately 1,300 nurses have enrolled in this recruitment and retention program and almost two-thirds of them have returned to clinical practice.

### Educational Mobility through Off-Campus Degree Programs

North Carolina continues to require more nurses prepared at the baccalaureate level and above. AHEC nurse faculty collaborate with schools of nursing to develop and operate off-campus RN-to-BSN and MSN programs in underserved areas of the state. These programs meet the need for flexible distance education formats, allowing nurses to advance their educations while continuing to work in their home communities and care for their families. AHECs provide on-site assistance such as classrooms, library resources, information services, logistical help, and student support. Given current faculty shortages in schools of nursing, master's degree programs that prepare faculty with both clinical and didactic educational preparation are especially needed. The 120 students who are currently enrolled will soon join the more than 1,000 graduates of AHEC sponsored off-campus programs.

### Clinical Site Development

New clinical training sites in rural, long-term care, and critical care settings assist schools of nursing to maximize enrollment and provide significant periods of training in workforce shortage areas. As directed by legislation, the NC AHEC Program provides clinical site development grants to the schools of nursing within the community colleges and the constituent institutions of the University of North Carolina. AHEC nurses work with schools

of nursing to identify new clinical sites for development, assist with funding, provide preceptor training, and consult on areas related to student use of clinical sites. More than 250 clinical sites have been developed as part of the grants program and 52 new sites are currently being developed.

## New Initiatives

While existing endeavors have been both effective and supportive, AHEC is also working on new strategies that address current employment challenges. Several of these approaches enhance nurses' continuing education opportunities, even while assisting with the development of supportive work environments.

**The Nursing Management Institute (NMI)**, funded through The Duke Endowment, offers training for nurses to develop the administrative skills that are required in today's healthcare environment. This on-line certification program, which includes essential management content, is convenient, inexpensive, and may be completed either as a series or as individual modules. Moreover, an organization may enroll a group of staff members in the program and benefit from the shared knowledge and understanding of an entire employee cohort.

**Magnetizing Your Organization** is an initiative that has a similar purpose. This statewide program assists healthcare institutions that may not be able to achieve magnet status learn about and institute enhancements that are typical of Magnet organizations. Day-long programs have already been presented in three regions of the state, where over 300 participants have benefited by the program.



Finally, the **Clinical Teaching Associate (CTA) project**, designed by Northwest AHEC has been piloted this year by North Carolina Baptist and Forsyth Hospitals, Winston Salem State University and Forsyth Technical Community College. According to the NC IOM Task Force *Report on the NC Nursing Workforce*, many able students are turned away from nursing programs, in part because of the lack of clinical faculty. The CTA project, funded by an AHEC grant, allows appropriately prepared staff nurses to work at their employing institution as clinical faculty members for part of their regular work time. Clinical teaching associates have the opportunity to explore a new role, introduce current clinical skills to students and increase student enrollment.

## Current Challenges and Opportunities for the Future

The three initiatives described above are examples of ways that AHEC has expanded its historical role to create additional training capacity and sharpen its focus through its traditional continuing education efforts. Unfortunately, all three of these initiatives have been funded with grant support, either from foundations or through special AHEC grants. Due to state revenue shortfalls, the AHEC budget has been reduced by approximately 15% over the last four years. As a result, all new initiatives in nursing and other fields have been funded by either reallocating existing funds or utilizing grant dollars.

There are a number of additional training needs that exist across the state that AHEC is prepared to address, assuming funding is forthcoming in future years. As the state grows out of the recession, it is hoped that additional state resources will be appropriated to address these critical nursing issues, as well as those affecting other health professions. Some of the areas where AHEC is prepared to take the lead, either building on existing programs or developing new initiatives, are as follows:

- a. **Expanded training capacity.** Building on its current efforts, AHEC is prepared to fund additional clinical site development grants, and fund companion efforts in preceptor and faculty development. These will be essential if the baccalaureate and community college programs are to add the kind of clinical training capacity they need in order to expand enrollments. As it has in the past, AHEC will focus these grants in underserved areas, and in specialty areas where clinical sites have historically been in short supply.
- b. **Expansion of educational mobility grants.** A clear recommendation of the IOM Task Force is to expand greatly the

career mobility opportunities for nurses at all levels. With additional resources, AHEC is prepared to both expand existing educational mobility grants and to develop new areas of focus. Areas where there continues to be unmet need include:

- LPN-to-RN Programs
- Educational Masters Degree Programs in remote site locations, in order to prepare additional faculty to fill vacancies in community colleges and universities
- PhD Outreach Programs, in order to prepare additional faculty for baccalaureate and masters programs
- Grants to Private Schools of Nursing, most of whom were excluded in the Legislation of 1989 creating the current grants program

- c. **Retention Strategies.** Programs such as the Nurse Management Institute as well as the Magnetizing Hospital Series are designed to strengthen the working environment for nurses and improve retention. With additional resources, AHEC can provide permanent funding for these programs and similar efforts to strengthen the work environment. Programs are also needed to create skills labs for smoothing the transition from education to work, and AHEC is prepared to support the development of these programs as well.
- d. **Diversity Initiatives.** Building on its prior work in health careers with young people, the AHEC Program is prepared to expand its work to the undergraduate level as well. AHEC proposes to develop a new grants program, patterned after the clinical site development grants, which would support innovative programs by community colleges and universities to recruit a more diverse student body. AHEC would offer grants to the schools to develop programs that recruit and retain more underrepresented groups, including minorities and men, into the field.

## Conclusion

The AHEC Program has a long history of offering programs to improve the recruitment and retention of nurses for all types of healthcare settings in the state. As a partner organization of the NC IOM Task Force, and as part of its strategic vision for the future, the AHEC Program is prepared to build on successes of the past and develop new programs to assure that North Carolina has an abundant supply of high quality nurses to meet its needs well into the next decade. **NCMJ**