

## Report Highlights

### Pennsylvania's Response to Current and Projected Shortages in the Nursing Workforce

**Background:** Following hearings held in 2001, the House Professional Licensure Committee concluded that critical shortages of health care providers “threaten the very fabric of the state’s health care system.” The LB&FC subsequently directed its staff to conduct a further examination of this issue with a particular focus on current and projected shortages within the nursing profession.

#### Study Conclusions:

**1. RN Shortages Nationwide.** Federal estimates done in 2000 placed the nationwide shortage of registered nurses (RNs) at 6.0% or 110,000 nurses. While some researchers believe that serious shortages are already evident, others contend that it will be another six to eight years before demographic changes in the population and the aging of the workforce converge to create severe shortages.

**2. RN Shortages in PA.** Shortages in the supply of RNs originally projected to begin in 2007 are already evident in 30 states, including PA. With 104,392 full-time equivalent RNs, PA’s shortage was estimated at 5% in 2000. Numerous RN workforce indicators provide evidence of growing shortages.

**3. Shortage Projections.** If current trends continue, increasingly severe shortages are projected both nationally and in PA. If not addressed, federal projections show that by 2020 there will be a national shortage of more than 800,000 RNs (29%) and PA’s shortage will be 40,000 RNs (30%).

**4. Underlying Causes of RN Shortages.** Population growth, an aging “baby boomer” population, and an aging RN population are dramatically increasing the demand for nursing services. The convergence of these and other demographic, social, economic, and workplace factors make the current situation more serious than past cyclical shortages.

**5. Shortage Impacts.** In some cases, nursing shortages are contributing to emergency department overcrowding, the diversion of emergency patients, a reduced number of staffed beds, discontinuation of programs and services, and cancellation of elective surgeries.

**6. Actions Taken in Other States to Address Shortages.** Nursing shortages are generating a variety of policy and legislative responses in almost all states. For example, most have convened special task forces or commissions to address health care workforce concerns. These and other actions (e.g., related to nursing education, scholarships and loans,

mandatory overtime restrictions, and nurse staffing ratios) are detailed in the report.

**7. State Nursing Centers.** As of early 2004, at least 13 states had established a statewide nursing center. Such centers conduct strategic nurse workforce planning and address issues of nursing supply, demand, recruitment, and retention.

**8. Actions Taken to Date in PA.** The state government has not yet developed a comprehensive strategy to deal with current and projected shortages or to coordinate state agency activities. The report identifies activities underway or planned by the State Board of Nursing, Department of Health, Department of Labor and Industry, PA Higher Education Assistance Agency, and other agencies.

**9. Nursing Education Program Capacity.** Some PA nursing schools are over-capacity and are being forced to deny admission to qualified students. Current program capacities do not appear to be sufficient to graduate the number of RN candidates that will be needed to meet projected future RN demand.

**10. Other Related Matters.** The report also includes information on related nursing initiatives at the federal level and workforce strategies proposed by national health care and stakeholder groups.

#### Recommendations:

1. The Governor or Legislature should establish a special nursing shortage task force or commission to raise the visibility of the nursing shortage issue and the level of planning and policy attention it receives at the state government level.

2. The special task force/commission should develop a “Comprehensive Nursing Workforce Strategy” for PA and convene a statewide summit of all pertinent stakeholder groups to achieve consensus on the plan and develop implementation strategies.

3. The General Assembly should consider creating a “PA Nursing Center” based on models successfully adopted in other states (e.g., NC, FL, and NJ). As is done in some states, such a center could be at least partially funded through a modest surcharge on nurse licensure fees.