Talking Points

HRSA Report on Nursing Workforce Projections through 2025

In December 2014, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) released a report titled *The Future of the Nursing Workforce: National- and State-Level Projections, 2012-2025.* Using the federal government's Health Workforce Simulation Model, HRSA found that the supply of Registered Nurses (RNs) and Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) in the U.S. will more than meet the projected demand over the next 10 years. In addition to finding a distributional imbalance of nurses at the state level, the authors concede that the national projections may be confounded by a number of factors, including the expanding roles for nurses, population growth, and an aging nursing workforce.

The efforts being led by schools of nursing and other stakeholders to address the nursing shortage and meet patient care needs are producing results. Even though progress is being made, the U.S. is still struggling to prepare sufficient numbers of RNs with advanced education to meet employer demands as new models of care continue to emerge. AACN developed the following talking points to help outline the HRSA report's projections focused on the RN population while underscoring the need to focus future workforce growth on addressing the shortage of baccalaureate- and graduate-prepared nurses. AACN is committed to working with nursing schools, policy leaders, and employers to address the workforce needs identified in this report and ensure that nurses are well prepared for roles that continue to evolve.

Principal Findings

- The number of new graduates entering the workforce following graduation from RN programs offered at the baccalaureate, associate degree, and diploma levels has increased from 68,000 in 2001 to more than 150,000 in 2013.

- Though the supply of RNs is projected to increase to 3,849,000 by 2025, the demand for RNs based on current utilization patterns is only projected to grow to 3,509,000.

- RN supply is projected to exceed demand in 34 states, however, 16 states will likely experience a nursing shortage through 2025, including Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Washington.

Study Limitations Identified by HRSA

Given the expanding practice opportunities for RNs and Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs), employer preferences, and the rapidly changing healthcare delivery system, the projected demand for RNs as cited in the report could be significantly under-estimated.

- An alternate scenario highlighted in the report (page 13) points to a potential shortage of 86,000 nurses by 2025 if demand for RNs returns to pre-recession levels (prior to 2007).

- The report does not consider the projected supply and demand for RNs by education level, which makes it impossible to determine if we are graduating sufficient numbers of in-demand baccalaureate- and graduate-prepared nurses.

- The report also does not address one of the fastest growing segments of the nursing workforce, Advanced Practice Registered Nurses, which include Nurse Practitioners, Clinical Nurse Specialists, Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists, and Certified Nurse-Midwives. To review HRSA's May 2014 report on *Highlights from the 2012 National Sample Survey of Nurse Practitioners*, see http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/healthworkforce/supplydemand/nursing/nursepractitionersurvey/npsurveyhighlights.pdf.

Throughout the report, HRSA highlights practice trends and study limitations that could confound RN supply and demand projections, including:

- "While not considered in this study, emerging care delivery models, with a focus on managing health status and preventing acute health issues, will likely contribute to new growth in demand for nurses, e.g., nurses taking on new and/or expanded roles in preventive care and care coordination." (Page 2)

- "Supply and demand will continue to be affected by numerous factors including population growth and the aging of the nation's population, overall economic conditions, aging of the nursing workforce, and changes in health care reimbursement." (Page 4)

- "While the evidence in this report points towards the U.S. currently educating slightly more nurses than required to meet future demand, a reduction in people choosing nursing as a career or a combination of factors such as early retirement or increased demand, could be sufficient to erase projected surpluses for RNs and LPNs." (Page 14)

- "If the growing emphasis on care coordination, preventive services, and chronic disease management in care delivery models leads to a greater need for nurses, this brief may underestimate the projected nurse demand." (Page 15)

The Demand for Baccalaureate- and Graduate-Prepared Nurses

Even though the nursing shortage may be easing in some parts of the country, the demand for RNs prepared in baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degree programs continues to increase. Having too few RNs with advanced education available to provide care negatively impacts patient outcomes. A robust pipeline of nurses entering APRN, researcher, faculty, and leadership roles is critical to meeting access and quality challenges, such as primary care needs, care coordination within new patient models, and health disparities.

- The Institute of Medicine (IOM) is calling for at least 80% of RNs to be baccalaureate prepared by the year 2020 as well as a doubling of the number of nurses with doctorates. The IOM's evidenced-based recommendations recognize that patient needs have become more complicated, and that nurses must attain the requisite competencies to deliver high-quality care.

- Achieving the IOM's "80% by 2020" goal does not seem feasible given the current output of baccalaureate-prepared nurses. According to a 2013 HRSA report, titled *The U.S. Nursing Workforce: Trends in Supply and Education*, only 55% of the RN workforce currently holds a baccalaureate or higher degree. Further, only 43% of first-time NCLEX test-takers were graduates of baccalaureate nursing programs.

- According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the demand for APRNs is expected to grow by 31% through 2022, which is much faster than the average for other professions (11% growth).

- During a presentation at AACN's 2014 Fall Meeting, Dr. Peter Buerhaus (Vanderbilt University) noted that according to preliminary projections made by him and his colleagues Dr. David Auerbach and Dr. Douglas Staiger, the future supply of RNs would increase in the neighborhood of 20-25% over the next 15 years, which is considerably lower than the HRSA projection (33% increase).

- Momentum is building for advancing nursing education at all levels. AACN, the Tri-Council for Nursing, community college leaders, and other authorities are all united in their view that a more highly educated nursing workforce is critical to meeting the nation's healthcare needs and delivering safe patient care. See www.aacnnursing.org/Portals/42/News/5-10-TricouncilEdStatement.pdf and hwww.aacnnursing.org/News-Information/Position-Statements-White-Papers/Academic-Progression .

- A growing body of research shows that lower mortality rates, fewer medication errors, and positive outcomes are all linked to nurses prepared at the baccalaureate and graduate degree levels. See AACN's fact sheet on *The Impact of Education on Nursing Practice:* www.aacnnursing.org/News-Information/Fact-Sheets/Impact-of-Education.

- Employers are recognizing that education makes a difference and are moving to hire the best educated entry-level RNs possible. AACN's data show that 79% of employers are now requiring or expressing a strong preference for nurses with a baccalaureate degree. See www.aacnnursing.org/News-Information/Research-Data-Center/Employment/2014.

- Data from HRSA's latest *National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses* show that graduates of baccalaureate nursing programs are more than three times as likely to pursue master's and doctoral degrees than are graduates of associate degree or diploma programs. Accordingly, national efforts to increase the population of APRNs, fortify the nurse scientist population, and alleviate the nurse faculty shortage must include a focus on expanding baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs.

- Given that the goals are focused on preparing nurses in baccalaureate and higher degree programs, federal and private funding for nursing education should be targeted directly to the schools and programs that prepare students at these levels. AACN will continue to focus its advocacy efforts on funding baccalaureate and higher degree programs, creating bridge programs to these degrees, and removing the financial barriers to academic progression.

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