

Nurturing a better nurse: The case for nurse residency programs



Patient populations are changing. They are older and have multiple chronic illnesses, and their treatment is increasingly complex. Physician residencies help prepare new doctors for these and other challenges, but what about nurses—who spend more time with patients than anyone, including doctors?

“In the absence of a formal transition-to-practice program, such as a residency program, nurses are expected to take a test, receive their licenses and then, with just a little orientation and preceptor time, jump right into caring for high-acuity patients, often using complicated technologies. But in reality, few nurses are prepared to hit the ground running on day one,” notes Jayne Willingham, MN, RN, vice president of nursing programs at Vizient®.

Senior Director Evy Olsen is currently leading the charge with the Vizient/AACN Nurse Residency Program™, but she is also a mother of a new nurse graduate and sees firsthand the tough transition from academia to bedside. The Vizient program’s survey data shows that at the six-month point in practice, new nurses’ confidence decreases and stress increases. “We provide all the tools needed to help the new graduate become a confident and competent nurse.”

Only 10 percent of hospital nurse leaders believe that graduates are prepared to practice their new trade.¹ And seven years of Vizient survey data shows that nurses come into their role with low levels of confidence. Meanwhile, the first-year turnover rate for new nurses is conservatively estimated at 17.5 percent.² Given that turnover costs hospitals, on average, \$88,000 per nurse, a new question emerges: Can hospitals afford *not* to have a nurse residency program in place?

What new nurses need to be their best

At any moment of their workday, nurses are confronted with stressful decisions. While this is to be expected in an acute health care environment, new nurses in particular can find it challenging to handle such tense situations without peer and mentor support.

“A nurse residency provides a network for nurse residents to be part of at a very critical time in their nursing career. It makes for a smoother transition from student to practicing nurse, while helping new nurses acclimate to the culture of

the organization,” explains Katie Davis, director of nursing programs at Vizient.

“It also shows the respect the organization has for the staff, by investing in nurses,” Willingham adds. “When nurses feel valued, they’re more likely to stay with the organization. This is one of the many reasons why participating in the residency should be mandatory, with incentives given for graduation.”

A model nurse residency program

One program that has a history of helping hospitals achieve exceptionally high retention rates is the Vizient/AACN Nurse Residency Program, developed jointly by Vizient and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. Of new nurses who completed the Vizient program in 2017, approximately 93 percent remained in their jobs, compared with an estimated 82.5 percent nationally.²

The one-year program is facilitated by senior nurses who also serve as mentors to the residents. This active participation by experienced clinicians, in combination with training in evidence-based practices, gives residents the skills they need to confidently and competently practice their profession. Core components of the program include a widely accepted, customizable curriculum; evidence-based practice projects; and regular surveys to measure improvement over the course of the year.

Experiential curriculum. The “skills gap” between nursing school and practice is well known in hospitals, especially among nurse leaders. The Vizient program closes this gap by immersing residents in a diverse curriculum that emphasizes clinical, interpersonal and leadership skills. A typical seminar day, for example, could begin with pain management and infection control, before transitioning to patient and family education or a discussion group dealing with burnout and compassion fatigue. No matter the content, nurse residents learn within an interactive, supportive format.

“Nurse residents have just completed years of school; few relish the idea of sitting back down in front of a computer or watching a presentation. We believe there is far more value in face-to-face interaction,” explains Davis.

This can take the form of simulated scenarios and other activities that encourage strategic thinking and active learning. One particularly popular activity resembles “escape room” games, in which a team of nurses must collaboratively hit on the right solution for a challenging patient care need. Afterward, a debriefing takes place to discuss key takeaways.

Another component of the program model that residents enjoy is the small-group sessions that provide dedicated time for residents to share clinical reflections as a way to learn from each other’s experiences—many of which aren’t taught in nursing school—under the guidance of a facilitator. Needless to say, these small groups are where strong and lasting support networks are formed.

Evidence-based projects. The Vizient program is designed to develop high-performing nurses who aren’t afraid to challenge the status quo—or to be challenged. Over the course of the program, each resident conceptualizes and leads a project aimed at making a significant improvement within the hospital. The resident is expected to demonstrate success by measuring and tracking specific outcomes.

Here are just some of the notable ways that, through their chosen projects, new nurses have tackled some of the most sensitive patient care needs in their hospitals:

- Devised protocols to identify and approach potential human trafficking victims
- Developed care protocols for patients in psychiatric wards who are transgender
- Put a recognized “pause and reflect” time in place for nurses who are the last ones in a room after a patient has passed away

Not surprisingly, the residents' projects often inspire veteran nurses to get involved in performance improvement work as well. They see what the new nurses are accomplishing and in turn, become interested in replacing "how we've always done things" with better ways to care for all patients.

"I am always so inspired by the passion of these nurse residents to take on issues that might otherwise have gone unaddressed. I think this alone speaks to the confidence that the program instills. And the organizations that give these passionate nurses a platform for putting their ideas into practice also deserve recognition," says Davis.

Conclusion

Once out of school, nurses have two choices: Either dive right into on-the-job training, with few practice runs, or find a hospital that offers a highly regarded nurse residency program. With the link between these programs and higher retention and satisfaction rates now plainly apparent, we can expect more new nurses to choose the latter. Nurse residency programs are clearly better for their professional development—and are changing the nursing profession for the better, too.

Surveys. The Vizient program surveys nurse residents at intervals throughout the program. The collected data serves a trifold purpose—enabling program administrators to measure increases in confidence and satisfaction among the residents, make corrections promptly when needed, and shape future programs based on trends revealed over time. With more than 93,000 nurse residency graduates to date, Vizient has amassed an invaluable repository of knowledge about how to craft the most effective residency program, including measuring the return on investment.

- 1 Goeddeke V. Residency programs help prepare competent nurses. Strategies for Nurse Managers website. http://www.strategiesfornursemanagers.com/content.cfm?content_id=235781&oc_id=602#. Accessed May 4, 2018.
- 2 Kovner CT, Brewer CS, Fatehi F, Jun J. What does nurse turnover rate mean and what is the rate? *Policy Polit Nurs Pract*. 2014;15(3-4):64-71.
- 3 Jones CB. Revisiting nurse turnover costs: adjusting for inflation. *J Nurs Admin*. 2008;38(1):11-18.



To learn more about the
Vizient/AACN Nurse Residency Program,
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