

Home Health Expansion Requires Innovation in Nursing Education

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About the Author

Dr. Steven Landers is the President and CEO of the Visiting Nurse Association Health Group, Inc., one of the nation's oldest and largest not-for-profit home health care organizations servicing New Jersey, Ohio and Florida. As a certified family doctor and geriatrician, Dr. Landers places a strong emphasis on house calls to the vulnerable elderly and has a specialized interest in geriatric medicine, home health, hospice and palliative care.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the central role of nurses as the nexus of quality homecare. Their value, in all of their forms, has never been clearer: Nurses are leaders, care coordinators, highly-skilled caregivers, assessors, medical technology managers, teachers, and lifelines for family caregivers. During the pandemic, nurses have responded to incredible demands; therefore, it is no surprise that the nursing profession remains highly trusted by the public.¹

The post-pandemic landscape for homecare and other health services, unfortunately, includes a limited supply of nurses that, if unaddressed, will constrain any expansion of the home health field. Long-term trends—including Medicare and payer initiatives to reduce the costs associated with unnecessary or avoidable hospital and post-acute facility stays,

consumer preference for aging in place at home when possible, and expanded use of telehealth in the home—will all increasingly fuel demand for home health and, therefore, nurses. The demand for nursing services—including the need for more nurse faculty, researchers, and primary care providers—is most evident in the projected number of openings each year for registered nurses (RNs). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Occupational Outlook Handbook projects that the nation will need 175,900 new RNs per year through 2029, after accounting for nurse retirements and workforce exits.² Indeed, nursing is among the top professions in terms of job growth, and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing has reported that the RN workforce is expected to reach 3.3 million participants in 2029, an increase of 7% versus 2019.

Growing Prevalence of Home Health Underscores Importance of Nurses

Home health care and related innovations can enhance the compassionate delivery of health care services by advancing independence and quality of life for both the patient and caregiver or patient's family. Home-based care can serve as the cornerstone of patient-centered care, enabling nurses and other in-home practitioners to build interpersonal relationships and identify additional issues and potential conditions that would not be visible during a traditional office visit. Home-based care also improves access to care and can contribute to reducing health disparities by breaking down transportation and other cost-related barriers that are often present within institution-based care. Finally, nurse contributions are often considered an invaluable lifeline to family caregivers who are generally "on-call" whenever the nurse is not present. Together, nurses, aides, personal care workers, and family members create a strong support network that improves the likelihood of aging at home.

The expansion of home-based care may be driven in part by managed care payers deciding to more widely feature the service as a covered benefit. In addition to offering a care setting that many (medically appropriate) patients prefer, aging outside of an institution can use predictive analytics to boost patient-centered care management aimed at reducing costs. For example, the "days at home in a year" metric, as opposed to institutional bed days, is becoming an important metric for certain managed care plans that are using it as a proxy for spend, as well as patient satisfaction and outcomes. The increasing medical complexity of the home health patient population (stemming from a combination of advanced age, comorbidities, and social circumstances prevalent in home health users), coupled with a greater portion of members utilizing the benefit, may lead to managed



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care plans more keenly relying on home health to improve outcomes and reduce unnecessary spending.³

However, the trend towards lower health care costs via care delivered in the home will be challenged by the projected shortage of nurses. Domestic nursing schools are graduating fewer new nurses than are needed given nurse retirements and population demands. The shortage is not for a lack of interest from the public in careers in nursing; indeed, there is a strong annual pool of qualified applicants to nursing schools, but the nation's nursing institutions are not able to expand enrollment fast enough to meet the needs of health care system. According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing [2019-2020 Enrollment and Graduations in Baccalaureate and Graduate Programs in Nursing](#) report, U.S. nursing schools turned away 80,407 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2019 due to insufficient number of faculty, clinical sites, classroom space, and clinical preceptors, as well as budget constraints.⁴ The nursing education establishment is also centered around hospital and facility-based care, and this further limits the pool of early career nurses prepared for home health work.

The following are recommendations policymakers, health care educational institutions, and other stakeholders should consider to address this supply-demand imbalance within nursing.

Recommendations

1) **Reframe the nursing teaching model.** In many geographic areas, the number of admissions has been capped due to lack of physical space within nursing schools and associated teaching hospitals. Rotational programs that utilize the classroom, virtual offerings, expanded home health and community-based settings, and hospitals will help align students with the physical capacities of a school's resources. Importantly, new models can emphasize more practical time spent in home-based settings and leverage the skills of nursing students. The increase in demand for care provided at home makes it essential that all of these rich learning opportunities are not limited to a "community health" month or elective, which will enable the home to become one of the primary venues of core clinical education.

National and regional home health organizations such as LHC Group, VNA Health Group, and BAYADA have recently expanded their partnerships with nursing schools through new pilot programs and initiatives that are showing early promise. The expanded role of home-based care in nursing education will require policymakers to explore with state boards of nursing and credentialing bodies how to address the unique student supervisory and faculty preceptor challenges of a home-based experience. Grants and demonstration funding opportunities could stimulate more innovation and activity in this area. Furthermore, nursing schools and policymakers can work together to reframe the perception that nurses need to focus largely on inpatient experience to be successful in the field. This can be done through exposing nurses early on in their education to home-based care via partnerships with providers or otherwise.

- 2) **Attract more nursing faculty through enhanced salary and benefits.** There is a robust population of nurses with advanced degrees who may be interested in pivoting their career into teaching if the shift did not imply salary reductions. Salary and benefits that are competitive with clinical and nursing administrative positions could help encourage more nurses to re-enter the field. Policymakers can consider grant, loan repayment, and other regulatory initiatives that provide resources or otherwise incentivize nursing schools to increase nursing faculty compensation, especially in areas that are seeing a surge in enrollment and/or class size.
- 3) **Improve communication and outreach regarding the benefits of a homecare nursing career.** The benefits of a nursing career are many, including stable lifetime earnings and lower rates of unemployment compared to other careers.⁵ The anticipated growth in demand for home health nurses should further support these benefits. Nurses also have more opportunities to change positions and the flexibility to move to new geographic locations. Nursing schools can work with local constituents to ensure these advantages are communicated in a more prominent way, especially within the millennial and Generation Z age groups.
- 4) **Maximize appropriate utilization of home telehealth to supplement the existing supply of nurses.** Recent advancements in telehealth have increased the viability of addressing nursing shortages via virtual health offerings that are appropriate for home-based encounters and patients. Although there is a real need for nurses given the increase in demand for home-based care, it is vital that providers and policymakers also think about how to scale in-person services efficiently via technology. The aging population is

increasingly more familiar and comfortable with using technology, and this trend, combined with a shift away from institutional settings due to COVID-19-related fears, suggests that future generations will gradually become more averse to institutional settings and demonstrate a preference for staying at home.

However, in the current home-based model, one caregiver can only reach one home/patient at a time, and much time is used when driving from one patient home to the next. The expansion of telehealth during the pandemic has improved access to home care, especially in rural areas where patients otherwise may have forgone care. Home health agencies have increased their use of both virtual nurse visits and remote monitoring, while also working as the in-home, in-person

clinical resource to complement and collaborate with physician telehealth services. Given that these services expanded during the public health emergency due to special regulatory flexibility, the future role of telehealth's impact on home-based care will depend on how policymakers address the issue after the pandemic. For example, if used appropriately, the permanent implementation of certain telehealth waivers could be an effective, low-cost solution to ensuring Medicare beneficiaries, especially those in rural areas, can maintain access to care. Although not all patient issues can be addressed remotely, appropriate use of telehealth will help patients and families remain independent at home and will enable nurses to reach more patients efficiently.

Conclusion

Since effective home health is about people caring for people, any efforts to grow and evolve the role of home health depend on the preparation and supply of the practitioner workforce, especially nurses. As such, concrete steps are needed to ensure a nursing supply that aligns with post-COVID clinical needs, patient preferences, and technological advances spurred during the pandemic. Prompt action on the initiatives outlined here, as well as related policies, will help expand nurse supply to meet post-pandemic demands for home-based care. Importantly, such changes will make the home setting more prominent in nursing education programs, which will help populate the pipeline of nursing students pursuing homecare as a career.

Recommended Innovations to Expand Home-Care Nursing

- Reframe nursing teaching model
- Enhance nursing faculty salaries and benefits
- Communicate benefits of home care career
- Utilize telehealth, as appropriate

Endnotes

- 1 Reinhart, R.J. "Nurses Continue to Rate Highest in Honesty, Ethics." Gallup. [January 6, 2020. Accessed August 26, 2021, at https://news.gallup.com/poll/274673/nurses-continue-rate-highest-honesty-ethics.aspx.](https://news.gallup.com/poll/274673/nurses-continue-rate-highest-honesty-ethics.aspx)
- 2 Nursing Shortage. Fact sheet, American Association of Colleges of Nursing. [September 2020. Accessed August 26, 2021, at https://www.aacnnursing.org/news-information/fact-sheets/nursing-shortage.](https://www.aacnnursing.org/news-information/fact-sheets/nursing-shortage)
- 3 SOAP Notes Featuring Kristy Duffey, MS, APRN-BC, FAAN. Podcast produced by [naviHealth](https://navihealth.com/essentialinsights/soap-notes-episode-four-featuring-kristy-duffey-podcast). March 24, 2021. Accessed August 26, 2021, at [https://navihealth.com/essentialinsights/soap-notes-episode-four-featuring-kristy-duffey-podcast.](https://navihealth.com/essentialinsights/soap-notes-episode-four-featuring-kristy-duffey-podcast)
- 4 Ibid, [American Association of Colleges of Nursing](https://www.aacnnursing.org/news-information/fact-sheets/nursing-shortage).
- 5 Regan, Tim. "Millennials Are Key to Solving Looming Nursing Shortage." *Home Health Care News*. October 2, 2017. Accessed August 26, 2021, at <https://homehealthcarenews.com/2017/10/millennials-are-key-to-solving-looming-nursing-shortage/>

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