

## In Demand: Reshaping Nurse Staffing

### Area hospitals take varying approaches to filling the nurse workforce shortage

by **Karen Bliss** • Contributing Writer

Latasha Harris used to be a travel nurse, but in 2019, she decided it was time to take the next step. She started Springfield-based travel nurse agency Nurse Hustle Recruitment LLC to fill a workforce need that's projected for the foreseeable future and to help travel nurses get fair pay.

"I decided that I wanted to start my own agency because I saw a lot of travel nurses get ripped off," Harris said. "The agencies would take more than they should from the nurse. I wanted to start a transparent agency. I wanted to share that traveling nursing experience with my co-workers and all the nurses that I met along the way."

Nurses that travel to hospitals around the country accept short-term nursing assignments that are typically paid an hourly rate that's higher than a staff nurse's hourly rate to compensate for travel costs and the lack of benefits. Hospitals typically work with a managed service provider to contract with agencies, like Harris' Nurse Hustle Recruitment, to hire travel nurses.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals and health facilities across the country were noting a shortage of nurses to fill vacancies, but post-pandemic, the shortage hasn't shown any signs of slowing down.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' employment projections, over 203,000 registered nurse openings are expected each year through 2031. Even with BLS' projections of a 6% growth in the nurse workforce by then, it's still expected to be shy of the needed workers by 7,800 vacancies a year.

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the shortage was caused due to varying factors including the pandemic, school enrollment not growing fast enough to support the need caused by aging baby boomers, a significant part of the nursing workforce reaching retirement age and salary changes amid record inflation rates.

Harris said 2022 was her agency's best year, with \$4.5 million in sales and an average of 60 nurses working at a time. However, in a post-pandemic world, things are changing in how hospitals are filling and paying for the shortages. Harris' agency is on pace for a decrease in sales – by over half at about \$2.2 million in 2023 – as the local hospitals are turning to other options for bridging the workforce gap. She currently has an average of 40 nurses at a time.

#### Gig nursing

Mercy Springfield Communities is utilizing its own platform to find nurses who want

See **STAFFING** on page **15**



© TAWNIE WILSON

Latasha Harris owns Nurse Hustle Recruitment, a Springfield-based agency for travel nurses that helps hospitals fill vacancy needs amid a worker shortage.