

Staffing: CoxHealth's use of travel nurses down 70% since pandemic peak

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flexible hours, in addition to float pool nurses, which are on-demand nurses employed directly by Mercy. Marie Moore, chief nursing officer, said Mercy developed an internal app, Mercy Works on Demand, that "gig nurses" can utilize. She said it works much like other on-demand work services apps, such as Uber, but specifically for health care jobs within the Mercy system. Mercy launched the app in early 2022.

"They can essentially live anywhere, but they are Mercy nurses," Moore said. "They don't obtain benefits through us, and their only requirement is to pick up one shift in 90 days. They can pick up shifts at any location, any time, any day of the week. It's very fluid."

Mercy's nursing workforce currently comprises 70% full- and part-time Mercy nurses, 18% gig or flex nurses, 10% outside agency/contracted nurses and the remaining 2% are PRNs or nurses that are called in as need arises. Mercy did not disclose the pay difference between these types of nurses.

Moore said besides focusing on flexible options, such as the float pool or gig nurses, Mercy is also forming partnerships with colleges and providing clinicals to "integrate earlier and financially

support people to go into the health care field." The results are new scholarship and tuition reimbursement programs, she said, noting Mercy also has increased hourly pay in 2022 as the market increases, which has helped with its nursing turnover rate, currently at 16%, which is down 12% in the past year.

Moore said Mercy is trying to become less dependent on the outside market pressures and they want to grow employment from within the community.

Increasing internal staffing

Along with Mercy, CoxHealth and Citizens Memorial Hospital are working to find various ways to retain talent to bridge the ongoing nurse hiring gap.

Citizens Memorial Hospital is trying to move away from using agencies and going back to the traditional hiring model, said Sarah Hanak, chief nursing officer.

"This calendar year, and coming completely out of the pandemic, our focus has been, how do we reduce agency hours?" she said. "How do we reduce the number of agencies that we are needing to utilize?"

Hanak said CMH currently uses less than 5% of its workforce through an agency as temporary staff and that long-term travel nursing is not financially sustainable. In southwest Missouri, specialty travel nurse agencies are paid around \$100 per hour and nonspecialized \$85-\$90. Even with fantastic agency nurses, she said, optimal patient

outcomes come from having nurses who are regularly on rotation. She said staff acute care nurses in southwest Missouri get paid an average of \$24-\$28 per hour.

CMH's approach, like Mercy Springfield Communities, has been paying students back for their education, if the nursing students come to work at CMH.

"While they're in nursing school, they may only get to see a clinic once or twice, or they may only get to see a specialty area once or twice," Hanak said, "but when they're in the apprentice program, we actually pay them to go out, whether it be home care and hospice, long-term care or clinic surgery."

Alicia Allen, CoxHealth's Springfield Hospital Group vice president of nursing, said the health system has found a big incentive for retaining nursing talent: the Magnet designation from the American Nurses Credentialing Center. It's meant to be the gold standard for nursing employers.

"When a nurse sees that designation, they know it is a health system that prioritizes nurses and their opinions in their day-to-day operations," Allen said.

Additionally, CoxHealth in June launched a Virtual Care Team to aid the bedside staff,

including nurses, with the use of technology.

CoxHealth employs about 3,000 registered nurses and 200 licensed practical nurses, plus 100 travel nurses. Allen said that's a 70% decrease in travel nurses from the peak of the pandemic.

Future of creative staffing

Harris said the concept of travel nursing has changed since the pandemic, as travel nurses were getting paid higher due to demand.

Harris said many of her travel nurses during the pandemic were making around \$120 an hour, whereas in 2023, they are getting about \$70 per hour. She said the nurses, and agencies like Nurse Hustle Recruiters, understand why the pay is drastically different.

All three hospital representatives confirmed that pay has decreased for travel nurses post-pandemic.

"I know where they're at, because I know that the government was very involved when it came down to finances for those two years," she said. "They had to be or we would've all gone under. But now we're back to reality. COVID-19 is not a threat. It's almost a part of us now. We're still making good money, right, we're nurses. Those two years really had us up in the clouds."

Although Harris said there is a decrease in the current demand for travel nurses, her agency plans to focus on where there's need – and she's eyeing long-term care facilities.

"It's going to be a lot of pivoting," she said. "It's going to be a lot of change and a lot of processes changing." •



Marie Moore: Mercy's nursing staff comprises 18% in gig/flex positions.



Alicia Allen: CoxHealth's Magnet designation is an effective recruitment tool for nurses.

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