

Where have all the nurse aides gone?

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Background:

Nurse aides and other paraprofessional workers provide most of the paid long-term care required by impaired persons whether at home or in facilities. Although this job is among the top 12 occupations in job growth in the US, many facilities and agencies in North Carolina and elsewhere have difficulty finding and keeping these workers. What is not well understood is whether or not this turnover means that these workers are leaving the field entirely or merely moving from one long-term care employer to another. Hence we sought to determine whether or not nursing assistants are leaving this employment sector and what other kinds of jobs they hold. This study is one component of a three-year grant awarded to the North Carolina Division of Facility Services by the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust to address aide recruitment and retention issues in the state. The Division of Facility Services has contracted with the Institute on Aging to assist with several grant activities.

Objectives:

The specific objectives of this research study were to: (1) estimate the extent to which trained nurse aides in North Carolina are currently employed in the long term care sector; (2) identify other concurrent or subsequent jobs these individuals hold; and (3) determine the annual earnings of active versus inactive nurse aides.

Methodology:

Data from two of North Carolina's state-operated employment-related data sources were linked and tabulated. The first data set is the North Carolina Nurse Aide Registry which contains all individuals certified as having completed training as a Nurse Aide I (NA-I) at any time since 1990.¹ Registrants were identified as either currently active—certified to work as a nursing assistant in a health care facility—or inactive—no longer certified to work as a nurse aide. The second data set is North Carolina's Common Follow-up System which contains information on all workers and their wages paid by employers in North Carolina.²

Research Questions:

We sought to answer 3 specific questions about Nurse Aide I registrants' employment situation during 1998³:

- What industries employed "active" and "inactive" registrants?
- How large were the wage amounts received by each group by employment sector?
- How many different employers did individuals in each group typically work for?

Findings:

At the time we accessed the registry there were 96,340 inactive registrants and another 82,801 active registrants.

Focusing on active registrants receiving wages in the health sector, we found that the median wage received by these individuals was \$11,358 from all employers combined. These data do not allow us to identify individuals who only worked part-time, but we can say that only 20 percent of these individuals had wages from all sources exceeding \$18,360. Further, only 20 percent of active nurse aides who received *any* income in each of the following sectors received more than the following amounts during 1998: \$7,711 in home health; \$11,202 in residential care; \$12,846 in nursing homes; \$14,528 in doctors' offices; \$16,558 in general hospitals. Most of these individuals received income from more than one employer; both within and outside health care, indicating unstable employment patterns. Altogether 60,746 (73%) received some income from outside the health care sector during 1998. Further, at least

38% of all wages received by all currently active Certified Nursing Assistant 1 registrants in 1998 came from employers outside of the health care sector.⁴ Much of this income came from work in retail sales, eating and drinking establishments, manufacturing, and transportation. Hence, the average active registrant received income from 1.89 different employers in 1998; while 13 percent had no employment record during 1998.

These findings contrast sharply with comparable figures for the 92,815 inactive registrants who seemed to fare better in the workforce, largely by moving away from work in long term care. Although it is difficult to tell from these data how many inactive registrants held full time jobs, the average number of employers per person was 1.05 and only 4% had no employment records. Thus relatively few held more than one job or switched jobs in 1998. The median 1998 wage for this group was \$14,425; and 20 percent had earnings in excess of \$25, 505 in 1998. Further, only 13 percent received income from the long term care, home health, or personal care sectors.

Conclusions:

Less than half of the 180,000 North Carolinians trained to work as nursing assistants during the last decade are currently certified to work as a nurse aide. Even among those who are certified, many apparently work only part-time as a nurse aide and supplement this income with earnings from other unrelated jobs in low wage industries. Those who used to be certified as nursing assistants have mostly left the field of long-term care and appear to have more stable jobs at higher wages in other industries. However, few are using their training to care for North Carolina's growing number of disabled and elderly citizens in residential care, home health or nursing homes.

Recommendations:

- More competitive wages will be required to keep nursing assistants and other frontline caregivers in the long term care sector.
- Some type of career ladder may be necessary to foster retention in long term care employment.
- One promising approach to stem the outflow of Certified Nurse Aides from the long-term care sector might be targeted incentives tied to education, training, and retention.

¹ The Nurse Aide Registry is maintained continuously by North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, widely used by employers, and captures periodic recertification. The data we used contains both the dates of certification and expiration. Only the entry level Nursing Assistant 1 (NA1) group which constitutes the typical nurse aide or frontline caregiver in a Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) or certified Home Health Agency (HHA) was profiled. Because certification is not required for caregivers in assisted living facilities and adult care homes, undercounting of individuals working in these settings is expected.

² The North Carolina Common Follow-up System, maintained by the Department of Labor (DOL) contains wage information submitted quarterly by all employers in North Carolina, and contains the amount and timing of aggregate wages received quarterly by each individual within standard industrial classification (SIC) or employment category. Because a given individual may either simultaneously or sequentially receive wages from several employers or work in different industrial sectors, the separate records maintained by the system allow this information to be captured.

³ Wage information from the 4 quarters of 1998 was obtained for all these individuals and broken down by the 4 digit SIC code. These were combined into 17 categories including several different types of long term care and health care employers. Information from the DOL does not allow us to identify the specific occupation in which an individual is working only the industrial code of their employer. DOL analysts perform all requested data analyses and returned aggregate statistics and tabular data to staff at the North Carolina Institute on Aging. This process assured these sensitive individual records and This procedure ensured that data provided were sufficiently detailed to make useful inferences, but at a level of aggregation ensures confidentiality by precluding identification of individuals.

⁴ Use of temporary service agencies is quite widespread in home health care and residential care due to high turnover and recruiting difficulties. Hence we made the conservative assumption that all individuals employed by the "temporary service" sector were actually being deployed back to work for health care facilities or agencies.