

Finding foreign nurses can help stem shortage

By John R. Wilson

As we all know by now, there is a critical need for registered nurses nationwide, and the current shortage of 125,000 RNs will increase to near-catastrophic levels in less than five years.

Hospital beds and long-term care beds are left empty, resulting in severe financial strain for the facility. The RN's increasingly complex and demanding responsibilities are compounded by required overtime, causing decreased quality of care and an earlier burnout rate. Estimates for the shortfall of RNs in five years are conservatively 450,000, and doubling in 10 years.

The RN's increasing wage has created a demand for the few slots available in nursing schools, and health care facilities have become aggressive in both domestic recruitment and in better retention techniques. But the increased number of available RNs from nursing schools will not be realized for at least five years, since there are not enough nurse educators. Even then the increased availability will offset only a small portion of the need.

These few RNs will fill mostly high-end positions in the acute care setting, leaving health-care facilities competing to attract RNs through higher wages and benefits. The economic forecast supports limited success for few health-care facilities, and then only temporarily.

Most health-care providers are trying to address this need by recruiting or considering the recruitment of foreign nurses. The recruitment process can take a year to complete, requires the assistance of either a highly trained staff member or a recruitment agency and an immigration attorney. The total cost per RN varies, but a realistic estimate is currently \$8,000 to \$10,000, although the cost is rising as the pool of qualified foreign RNs decreases and the need increases.

Many health-care facilities are troubled by the delay and cost, but often the future needs of the facility have not been properly projected, or an understanding that the cost of the entire recruit-

ment process is recovered after having employed the foreign RN for only three to five months.

Once a decision is made to pursue foreign RNs, the health-care facility must decide whether it wants to self-recruit or use a foreign recruitment agency.

After application fees, exam costs, transportation, attorney fees and other expenses are

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deducted from the total, the facility is paying, on average, approximately another \$3,500 to \$5,000 per RN to a recruitment agency to find a qualified foreign RN, follow the RN through the application process, including scheduling exams, arranging transportation and, importantly, providing a substitute RN if for any reason the RN fails an exam or otherwise drops out.

Recruitment agents can seem expensive, but a good recruiter is worth every penny, while a bad nurse recruiter will cause premature gray hair and economic disaster. Without retention, recruitment is useless. When a facility self-recruits, the prospective RN receives attention that also will be accomplished with a good recruiter, increasing future retention. It is important to choose your recruiter carefully and request references.

If the health-care facility and the nurse recruiter are two legs of the recruitment process, then your immigration counsel is the third. Some recruiters offer their own immigration counsel to complete the immigration application. You should ask yourself this question: Who is the attorney representing – you or the nurse recruiter? Unless you are an expert in immigra-

tion, you should insist upon retaining your own immigration attorney who will represent your interests and work with either the nurse recruiter or assist you in developing your own self-recruitment program.

The total cost of the recruitment will be the same, and you will have your own attorney. As with the nurse recruiter, ask for references when choosing an immigration attorney, and be sure the attorney practices healthcare immigration law.

Finally, when deciding if you need to pursue foreign nurse recruitment, consider your present needs, the success of your domestic recruitment efforts and what you project your needs will be in about one year. Depending upon your needs, you may want to stagger the number of foreign applicants to a specific number per month, allowing better allocation of budgetary needs today while assisting in the assimilation of the RNs as they arrive.

Lastly, determine your costs for hiring contract RNs over those as employees, and you will realize that within one year of employment, you have paid for the entire recruitment process and saved at least \$20,000 per RN (and often double this) — and that is in just the first year. Thereafter, the savings increase.

Foreign nurse recruitment is not the solution to the U.S. nursing shortage, but it is a viable method to help health-care facilities meet their needs. Even with a huge increase in domestic nursing students, the shortage of RNs will increase to critical levels in the near future. When the music stops, you want to be sure that you have sufficient RNs to meet your needs.

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