



Flexibility will bring nurses back to long-term care

Technology platform finds caretakers, who are also often caring for their own, are prone to feeling burnout quicker than usual.

No question, the demands placed on healthcare workers caring for an aging population in the years before, during and since the pandemic strained and stretched any staff members who remained. Doing more with less became a baseline expectation. Chronic understaffing plagued the sector.

The popular assumption was that more training, more recruiting, and simply more full-time workers would fix it.

But has it?

There were a little more than 4 million nursing jobs (registered, practical and vocational) as of 2024, according to the most recent data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Meanwhile

there are more than 5.9 million registered and practical nurses licensed in the United States, according to the National Council of State Boards of Nursing. That's a potential pool of nearly 2 million workers.

The industry hasn't been short on nurses. It's been short on reasons they should come back after getting burnt out, says at least one expert with a finger firmly on the senior care pulse.

"It's a flexibility shortage," says Mike Vitek, CEO of ShiftKey,, a workforce technology platform that uses a data-driven marketplace to facilitate the connection between independent licensed professionals with facilities.

"There are nurses out there," he adds. "They're in every town in America. What they want is a schedule that fits their daily lives. The licensed nurses who left the industry never stopped caring — the healthcare workforce system just stopped working for them."

Finding the right balance

Of 2,400 healthcare workers ShiftKey surveyed on its platform, 40% said they had previously left the industry because of burnout.

It's what some researchers have seen for years. In a report titled "Top Factors in Nurses Ending Health Care Employment Between 2018 and 2021," investigators faulted healthcare systems that continued to struggle with recruitment and retention. Of 7,887 nurses surveyed, 26% pointed to emotional exhaustion or burnout,

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21% cited insufficient staffing, and 18% noted family obligations.

The report's authors also highlighted a similarity in the ages of those who left the industry and those who were still working, "suggesting that a demographically similar, already existing supply of nurses could be attracted back into health care employment."

Nearly half of the workers surveyed separately by ShiftKey had at least 10 years of work experience. "This isn't a green, unreliable workforce," Vitek explained. What many of them (71%) are is also a caregiver at home (71%) who needed a better work-life balance.

"These are seasoned, credentialed professionals. They left traditional roles when the structure around them broke down, not because their commitment to patients did. A meaningful number found this option instead of leaving the field for good."

Reliability for operators

If flexibility can keep nurses coming back, it also can offer reliability to facility managers and shift coordinators who have long juggled care schedules in disparate systems.

ShiftKey supports integrations with many scheduling platforms facilities already use, so operators don't have to abandon their existing systems or manage separate logins to track their workforce. Instead, ShiftKey connects into that software to give operators a single view of

who is working when and where.

Vitek describes the ShiftKey platform as being a connector, and the workers who use it as connective tissue whenever a facility needs them most.

Providers always will have and need full-time staff, who may even be more likely to stay knowing there's consistent backup. And they may still need

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— Mike Vitek, CEO, ShiftKey

traveling nurses for weeks at a time. But as shifts open up, as they invariably do, facility coordinators can fill them with access to a roster of independent nurses and aides seeking work that works for them, in the places they choose, without sacrificing quality care.

Consistent staffing gets attention — from families and referrals. A "favorites" feature also can keep the same flexible, independent worker high on an operator's radar when a shift opens.

One reviewer of the platform lauded a nurse who had cared for her mother at a facility that had engaged the worker through ShiftKey. "I wish there were a hundred more of her," the daughter wrote. She's caring, compassionate and my mom loves her."

Making the connection

Anyone who has led, worked in, or lived in a long-term care

setting has experienced staffing stretched thin. Average turnover rates still hover above 20% across categories in US nursing homes, and exceed 40% for certified nursing assistants.

That turnover is costly, both financially and reputationally for a facility.

The problem, though, hasn't been supply and demand, it's

been a disconnect between what workers need and what facilities could offer. Now, they're beginning to understand where each stands.

"That's the goal here," Vitek says. "Allow professionals with the right credentials to see open opportunities so they can choose what fits best."

Flexibility isn't a perk, he quickly adds. It's an option that can bring someone back — from retirement, from another industry, or bring someone new to the space — and maybe even keep our healthcare professionals in the facility, in the community, and most importantly, doing what they love to do. ■



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