
Nurturing the nurturers

FOR NORTHWELL, SUPPORTING NURSES IS PART OF THE JOB

Maureen Kenney, RN, has spent most of her career at Northwell Health's Huntington Hospital for a simple reason: "I truly love it," she says. "The

people who work here live here in Huntington, and everybody is somehow connected. Everyone here is family."

Kenney, who has served as a nurse manager for 35 years, has forged strong bonds with long-term colleagues as well as newly minted team members. Among those newer coworkers: her 26-year-old twin daughters. Emily is currently working the night shift as an ICU nurse at Huntington, and Emily's sister Elizabeth is pursuing her nurse practitioner's license while she practices at Cohen Children's Medical Center.

"I would have supported them in whatever they wanted to do, but I was thrilled that they chose nursing," says Kenney.

While not every nurse has biological family members following in their footsteps, Kenney is hardly alone in choosing to spend decades at Northwell. Kathleen Casler, MS, RN, has been with the health system for her entire career. "I'm at the 17-year mark, and I'm often the junior in the room," says Casler,

who is senior director of clinical professional development.

The fact that so many nurses keep coming to Northwell — and, more importantly, staying — runs counter to national trends. In 2022, when the average turnover rate for nurses was 27%, Northwell managed to keep its turnover rate to less than half of that — just 13%.

"I think it has to do with our culture," says Maureen White, RN, executive vice president and chief nurse executive at Northwell. "We've been working on creating an empowering environment for our nurses for the past 25 years."

Staving off a shortfall

Health care researchers, educators and clinicians have been concerned about a looming shortage of nurses for years — one report projects a shortfall of up to 450,000 nurses by 2025. The reasons are many: provider burnout and attrition, the aging of Baby Boomers, who are increasingly needing nursing care, and the growth of employment opportunities for nurses that go beyond the traditional hospital setting.

Yet this isn't the first time that the country has faced a potential nursing gap, notes White, who holds the Margaret Crotty & Rory Riggs Clinical Chair in Nursing. "When I assumed

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my role in 1999, everyone was talking about a nursing shortage. We knew that if we didn't make Northwell an attractive place to work, we'd have a difficult time."

Since then, Northwell has instituted a variety of strategies designed to attract and retain nursing professionals. Step one: Foster two-way dialogue between leadership and front-line teams.

"If something is not right, if you believe a patient or team member is at risk for a safety issue, you can stop the line at any time and tell anybody — a physician, a medical chairperson or even the chief operating officer," says White.

Adding to the culture of transparency, Northwell executives make a point of not keeping secrets. "In health care, the rule is usually, 'Don't give staff bad news; they can't handle it,'" says White. "But these are adults. If we're going to make changes, we explain what we're doing and why. Our nurses know that they

can ask any question and we'll give them a truthful answer."

A collaborative approach

Northwell has also formalized this approach by creating Collaborative Care Councils, working groups that meet on a monthly or bimonthly basis to address key areas, such as patient experience, quality and safety, resource utilization and creating healthy work environments. The councils were launched in 2007; there are now more than 400.

"These are chaired by front-line team members," White explains. "Management will sit in the room and advise as needed, but the best ideas come from the people at the front lines."

Over the years, councils have led the way on a number of changes, including the implementation of "no pass zones" a few years ago. If a patient presses the call button, any hospital employee walking by — whether it's a clinician from another



FAMILY MATTERS: Long-time Northwell nurse Maureen Kenney, RN (center), is flanked by her daughters, both nurses: Elizabeth Kenney, left, and Emily Kenney, right.

department, or a housekeeper, dietitian or chief executive — must stop and ask if they can be of assistance.

Paths for ongoing development

Keeping nurses engaged is also integral to Northwell’s approach. “We offer many opportunities for continued career development and advancement,” says Casler. Such options actually start before a nurse is even officially employed by Northwell.

Each summer, Northwell welcomes about 100 rising junior nursing students to an 8-week paid extern program. Students are placed with a clinical preceptor; they shadow that preceptor, assist in clinical care and learn about the role of the registered professional nurse in the hospital environment.

An externship often ends with a job offer, says Casler: “More than 60% of externs from last year have since been onboarded as employees.”

The educational support doesn’t stop there. Newly employed nurses with less than 6 months’ experience are automatically welcomed into a nurse residency program, to facilitate a smooth transition between being a nursing student and serving as a full-fledged nurse. A nurse mentorship program provides further support by pairing young nurses with experienced colleagues for one-on-one guidance.

Nurses looking for a change in direction at any point are encouraged. “If you enter Northwell as a medical surgical nurse and later want to do a different specialty, like critical care, we’ll direct you to a fellowship,” says Casler.

Those who seek advanced degrees are also supported by Northwell — including financially. Many take advantage of scholarship and tuition reimbursement programs.

“I started in labor and delivery, then used tuition reimbursement to get my masters

in nursing education,” says Casler. “Now I’m using tuition reimbursement again to get my PhD. I’m a walking billboard!”

Supporting emotional well-being

The Covid-19 pandemic was the most intense stress test for health care organizations imaginable. Northwell started working on strategies to combat stress and support frontline workers before the first Covid patient even arrived.

“We quickly set up tranquility tents and tranquility spaces throughout the hospital — places to decompress before or after a shift,” says White. “We also provided areas to shower and change clothes for frontline workers who were worried about bringing their scrubs home. And we rented out hotel rooms for those who didn’t feel comfortable going home to their families.”

Through it all, Northwell nurses continued to connect

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DEGREE IN
NURSING**

and help each other out; some even took turns watching each other’s children when schools were closed. That team spirit is what kept nurses like Kenney going throughout the hardest days — and why she feels so strongly that her daughters have chosen the right career.

“What’s kept me in my position so long is that I know we’re a team at Northwell,” she says. “Regardless of official roles, we count on each other’s strengths and we provide support where it’s needed. We complement each other.”