

NOVA SCOTIA'S

Nursing Strategy 2015



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Background

Nova Scotia's 14,000 nurses make essential contributions to the health and wellness of Nova Scotians every day through direct care, education, research, and leadership, and they are key members of collaborative, patient-centred health-care teams.

Simply put, the system could not function without Registered Nurses (RNs), Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs), and Nurse Practitioners (NPs). That's why it is critical to have a plan and to take the steps needed to maintain a stable nursing workforce in the province for years to come.

Like other jurisdictions in Canada, Nova Scotia faces an aging population and an aging workforce. We're also operating in a system that is constantly changing. Scopes of practice are evolving and models of care are being adapted to better meet the health needs of the population. Recently, the entire system was restructured, consolidating ten separate health authorities into two, allowing for a more integrated and responsive system. The streamlined system allows for a provincial approach to planning, and will help to provide consistent, quality care across the province in an effective and sustainable system.

Within this climate of change, there is one constant—the need for nurses. With that in mind, and in response to growing concerns about a nursing shortage, Nova Scotia's Nursing Strategy is being updated to focus our existing resources on a plan that will ensure an adequate number, mix, and distribution of nurses. Developed in 2001, the

strategy was updated in 2007 by the Department of Health and Wellness in partnership with the Provincial Nursing Network.

The first Nursing Strategy was focused on recruitment, retention, and renewal, all of which remain relevant today. Since the strategy was introduced, more than \$85 million has been invested to recruit and retain nurses in Nova Scotia. As a result, there are about 2,000 more nurses in the workforce now than in 2001. This was accomplished by increasing the number of undergraduate nursing seats at Nova Scotia's universities (from 306 first-year seats in 2006 to 401 in 2014) and aggressively hiring and retaining graduates of RN and LPN programs (for example, 90 per cent of RN graduates were hired in 2014 compared to 53 per cent in 2001). The increase in numbers of LPNs was accompanied by a significant growth in their scope of practice and expansion into a number of acute care and community settings. The role and numbers of NPs have also expanded, and NPs are key members of care teams in many settings, including the community, emergency departments, and hospitals. These gains are impressive, and they will help to inform our path forward as we update Nova Scotia's Nursing Strategy for the second time and meet new challenges.

Support at Every Stage

As many of our most experienced nurses prepare to retire from the workforce, and larger numbers of new graduates enter, it's critical that opportunities and support are provided so nurses can teach and learn from each other.

It's also important to recognize and respond to the challenges of recruiting nurses in rural areas and in certain clinical specialties. As well, the barriers that prevent nurses from practicing to their optimal scopes must come down. The inefficient processes and non-nursing tasks that continue to occupy far too much of a nurse's day must be addressed. Nova Scotia's updated Nursing Strategy will build

on the success of the past and address the challenges of today to create a plan for the future. Most of all, the strategy will be focused on ensuring that we have an adequate number, mix, and distribution of nurses to provide optimal patient care and help Nova Scotians take charge of their own health and wellness.



Evidence & Experience

To ensure that the updated strategy is both relevant and responsive, it is grounded in evidence and shaped by the experience and expertise of Nova Scotia's nurses.

With the help of external health human resources planning experts at the Dalhousie University/World Health Organization Collaborating Centre on Health Workforce Planning, a review of recruitment and retention strategies used provincially, nationally, and internationally was conducted to help inform Nova Scotia's approach. The consultants then used a needs-based simulation model to estimate the supply of nurses and the potential requirements for nursing staff based on the province's demographics and projected health-care needs. Their analysis, contained in the report *Policy Options to Inform Nova Scotia's Provincial Nursing Strategy*, clearly identified the need for a multi-faceted approach to maintain a stable nursing workforce.

The analysis and findings were then brought to nurses themselves. Several sessions were held with LPNs, RNs, and NPs around the province, and online feedback was invited from all nurses. With the findings of the consultants as background, nurses were asked to provide their views on how the resources allocated for the Nursing Strategy (\$4.6 million annually) should be shared across the province and the profession. It is their wisdom combined with the evidence that will allow us to put in place a strategy that offsets the anticipated retirements in the coming years.

Though there are more nurses practicing today, we know that any reversal of the progress made in recent years would greatly exacerbate a potential future shortage, given the number of retirements expected in the coming years. Information systems monitoring the supply of nurses have been enhanced, making it much easier to understand and evaluate the workforce. Efforts to further improve information gathering will continue through collaboration between government, employers, educators, and regulators.

Our Thanks to the PNN

The Provincial Nursing Network (PNN) is made up of nurses from across the province. It acts as a resource and advisory body for the Department of Health and Wellness. Members of the network include practicing nurses, employers, educators, professional regulatory colleges, and unions. This diverse membership gives the network its strength and credibility to carry out its important function. The continued success of the Strategy and its initiatives is a direct result of the ongoing collaboration of its members and its relationships with key stakeholders in Nova Scotia and across Canada.

A Multi-Faceted Approach

Based on the evidence we gathered and the input of Nova Scotia's nurses, we developed four key goals for the revised strategy:

- Maintain the gains made through the Nursing Strategy since 2001 to recruit and retain nurses.
- Address new challenges related to the changing age-and-experience mix of the nursing workforce.
- Focus on clinical specialties and geographic areas that will see the highest levels of retirements in the coming years.

- Remove the barriers that prevent nurses from doing the work they are educated and licensed to do.

In order to meet these goals, we will continue many of the actions from the previous two Nursing Strategies, adapt to meet the evolving needs of the health-care system, and take additional steps to address new challenges. We will work together across the system, in partnership with practicing nurses, educators, employers, regulators, and unions.



Nursing Education

Maintain existing seats in nursing programs

Maintaining the existing seats in nursing programs is a vital component of our strategy. We will continue to work in partnership with educational institutions to support faculty renewal and will monitor and support the success of students in these programs. We will continue to improve on the existing distributive model of education, which offers access to RN, LPN, and NP courses at multiple sites across the province. The Nursing Strategy will include funding to upgrade the simulation lab and physical facilities at the Yarmouth campus of Dalhousie University. As well, the Department of Labour and Advanced Education will provide funding to upgrade the simulation lab at St. Francis Xavier University.

Continued funding for targeted work placement programs

Research also demonstrates that work placement programs, such as the Co-operative Learning Experience (co-op) program, are effective recruitment tools. Nurses throughout the province indicated that they highly value the co-op program, which provides some senior nursing students with employment experience between their third and fourth years of study. The student gains experience during paid summer employment with one of the province's health employers, and employers benefit from a proven recruitment tool.

A number of co-op placements are assigned to eligible Aboriginal or African Canadian nursing students. The strategy will continue the practice of assigning seats to further encourage employment equity and cultural competency.

Recently, the co-op program was revised to focus on clinical and geographic areas that are expected to see particularly high retirement levels in the coming years (e.g., long term care, operating rooms). In this way, new nurses are introduced to these critical areas before positions are vacated. The Nursing Strategy will continue to fund this initiative. The program will evolve over time as it aligns with changes made in undergraduate nursing education and the changing needs of the health-care system.

Implement the recommendations of the RN Nursing Education Review

Each year the province spends \$21.6 million for Nova Scotia's three nursing schools and a total of 1,604 nursing seats. Given the pace at which the health system evolves, it's critical that today's students are offered every opportunity to be as "practice-ready" as possible when they graduate. That begins with a solid foundation. Recognizing the need for greater collaboration among the province's schools and the need to be responsive to population health needs, the province, in partnership with the three schools of nursing, conducted a thorough review of undergraduate nursing (RN) education in Nova Scotia.

The overall goal of this collaborative effort was to have well-prepared graduates equipped to meet the needs of Nova Scotia's health-care sector, across a continuum of care settings. After broad consultation and a national review of nursing education models, and using the best available evidence, the province produced a final report, *Building our Future: A new collaborative model for undergraduate nursing education in Nova Scotia*.

The report identified numerous opportunities to improve existing education and to foster greater collaboration among the three nursing schools and with employers. The need for change was concentrated in three main areas: admission, progression, and graduation.

To improve the admission process, the report recommends:

- having more than one program start time and consequently more than one graduation annually, to better align with the hiring needs of employers and avoid large numbers of graduates entering the labour market at once
- incorporating recognition of prior learning, with prerequisites and entrance requirements (currently very different at each school) better aligned across the three schools
- using a common first-year curriculum at all three schools, to allow easier transfer across schools after the first year
- instituting a common accelerated program with a single admission policy so that students with approved prerequisites will be able to enter a six semester program at each nursing school delivered over 2 or 3 calendar years

To improve progression through undergraduate nursing programs, the report recommends:

- aligning education with modern practice settings
- sharing clinical placements, instructors, and resources
- having more focused clinical practice time
- providing innovative delivery methods, such as simulation learning
- offering specialty clinical concentration based on population needs
- supporting students to repeat a course if needed without missing a full academic year

Finally, to assist with graduation and transition from school to work, the report recommends:

- staggering graduation times
- implementing best-practice guidelines across schools with clinical partners
- offering a 13-week senior consolidation (ideally where the student will be working after graduation)
- aligning the transition-to-practice experience with education and provincial needs
- having a shared strategy to support success on the registration exam

The Nursing Strategy fully embraces the work and recommendations of the Education Review. The strategy will support the enhanced collaboration between schools and will fund the development of transition-to-practice models. Collaboration will be key in integrating the large number of new graduates into the workplace. To ease the transition, funding will be targeted for the education and support of experienced nurses who will act as preceptors and mentors to new nurses.

Review LPN programs

Employers have been pleased with the practice-readiness of LPNs educated in Nova Scotia. However, in some communities there are challenges related to where and when LPNs are graduating. Our Nursing Strategy will support a review of program locations and graduation schedules with the Nova Scotia Community College to ensure alignment with the hiring needs of health-system employers.

Nursing Employment

Hiring and new graduate orientation

Key success factors in recruiting and retaining new nurses include offering them full-time employment and, once they are hired, thorough orientation. We will continue to collaborate with employers across the province to offer permanent, full-time positions to as many graduates from Nova Scotia's nursing programs as possible.

Additionally, our nursing strategy will continue to support the orientation of new graduates as they transition into the workforce. Targeted funding will be available to free up time for experienced nurses to mentor the large number of new nurses entering the workforce. One such example is the 80/20 model, in which nurses are enabled to spend 80 per cent of their time on patient care and the remaining 20 per cent of their time in activities such as mentoring new nurses, professional development, and workplace improvement initiatives. As outlined in the *Policy Options* report, this type of approach has proven to improve nursing satisfaction and reduce turnover.

Quality practice environments

A healthy, thriving workforce comprises nurses at all levels of experience and in a variety of roles. The evidence is clear: retention of nurses is enhanced through the development of strong professional practice environments and high-functioning health-care teams.

Nurses told us that access to continuing education and professional development is an important priority throughout their careers. The Nursing Strategy will continue to provide funding to support professional development for nurses. The funding will be targeted and strategic, focusing on educational opportunities that improve quality practice environments, grow clinical leadership, develop inter- and intra-professional teams, and prevent injuries.

Additionally, the strategy will address approaching retirements in clinical areas that require specialized training (such as critical care, operating rooms, and mental health and addictions) by increasing the number of post-entry specialty programs for RNs and LPNs at the Registered Nurse Professional Development Centre. The strategy will offset employer costs for these programs.

Given the large number of students and new graduates in the workplace, some professional development funding will be targeted to support nurses who serve in preceptor and mentor roles.

Nurses across the province know their practice environments and the patients they serve. Nurses have often led the way in developing and facilitating the changes that lead to better care. They also know that safe work environments are critical both to patients and to health professionals. Evidence cited in the *Policy Options* paper shows that nurse-led workplace improvement initiatives lead to greater nurse satisfaction and retention. The Nursing Strategy will fund nurse-led improvement initiatives and support the sharing of successful innovations across the province.

Recruiting for hard-to-fill positions

Nova Scotia's nursing workforce is aging, with up to 65 per cent of practicing nurses over the age of 50 in some areas. There is no question that impending retirements will have an impact on the health system, and this may be even more challenging in some rural areas of the province and in some clinical specialties. It will be critical to be innovative when addressing these challenges. Along with the steps that will be taken as a result of the Nursing Education Review—which will modernize and strengthen the quality and effectiveness of undergraduate nursing education—the Nursing Strategy will support the communities, employers, and areas in greatest need to improve recruitment and retention strategies for hard-to-fill positions. The Nursing Strategy will create a new Innovation Fund to assist with recruitment and retention for hard-to-fill positions.

We know that every community is different, and what works in one area may not in others. That's why the Innovation Fund will provide flexibility when implementing strategies to attract and retain nurses. The fund will be overseen by a committee of health professionals using established criteria. As well, the newly restructured and streamlined health system enables easier sharing of successful recruitment and retention practices, which can now be more widely implemented. Employers will also be encouraged to invest in rigorous succession planning, particularly in areas where high numbers of retirements are expected.

Optimizing scopes of practice

While the strategies proposed and the improvements made in past nursing strategies have had—and will continue to have—an impact, they are not enough. It is critical that the systemic practices that get in the way of nurses doing the work they have been educated and licensed to do are addressed. As evidence clearly illustrates, the resulting improvements to productivity will have a significant impact. It simply cannot be ignored.

Barriers that prevent nurses from working to their optimal scopes must be removed. Policy, legislative, and regulatory obstacles cannot be tolerated. Nova Scotia has often led the way in removing barriers to optimized scopes of practice. For instance, the ratio of LPNs to RNs is higher in Nova Scotia than any other province or territory in Canada (40.5 per cent). LPNs are now working in a larger variety of settings and roles, including emergency departments, maternity/newborn units, and operating rooms. Previous nursing strategies have supported key elements of the expanded LPN role, including medication administration and patient health assessment. Additionally, the previous strategy funded the development of an LPN leadership course to support LPNs to step into their new optimized roles, a role that will continue to expand in Nova Scotia.

Another recent example of supporting optimized scopes of practice for nurses occurred when the province amended the Hospitals Act to enable NPs to discharge patients from acute care settings. In addition, these amendments allow RNs to assess, treat, and release appropriate patients from emergency departments and collaborative emergency centres across the province.

These initiatives are patient-focused, ensuring that the right provider is providing care in the right time and place. We know there are additional opportunities to optimize the RN role in the same way roles for LPNs and NPs have been optimized in recent years. Our nursing strategy will continue to support role optimization for all nurses to improve the quality and safety of care provided to patients, families, and communities.

Improving workforce productivity

Improving productivity doesn't mean that nurses need to work harder. It doesn't mean working longer hours, skipping breaks, or fitting more into an already full shift. The fact is, nurses are often the only staff available 24/7 and, as a result, they are left doing everything from cleaning rooms to typing and filing – tasks that do not require nursing expertise. In many cases, despite living in an electronic age, manual processes are still in place.

That's preventing nurses from practicing to optimal scope. Increased productivity will require the support staff, equipment, technology, and effective operational processes to allow nurses to do their job—caring for patients, families, and communities. It means developing supportive team-based models and employing team-building activities that enable communication and collaboration. The clutter that prevents nurses from using their skills and expertise for the benefit of their patients—and the health system generally—must be cleared.



Conclusion

In sessions around the province, nurses told us that leadership is critical, and that courage is required to implement the actions needed to maintain stability in the workforce.

The evolving age-and-experience mix of nurses demands a thoughtful strategy to ensure that we continue to recruit and retain nurses. Health care must be provided more efficiently with a continued focus on safety and quality.

A multi-faceted approach is required. Trends must be monitored, issues evaluated, and adjustments made as needed. Every action in the Nursing Strategy is rooted in evidence and in the experience and expertise of nurses themselves.

We wish to thank everyone who provided their insights and input, and extend our sincere appreciation for being with us every step of the way.



NURSES TOLD US...

- New registered nurses need to be more practice-ready.
- New nurses need support in transitioning from school to the workforce.
- New nurses will stay in Nova Scotia if they get permanent, full-time jobs.

THE NURSING STRATEGY WILL...

- Integrate the recommendations of the Nursing Education Review, better aligning education with employer needs.
- Fund upgrades to the simulation lab and physical facilities at Dalhousie's Yarmouth campus.
- Fund the design and implementation of better transition-to-practice models by Nova Scotia's educators and employers.
- Continue to support workplace orientation for new graduates.
- Make it easier to hire new RNs by graduating them sooner (accelerated BScN programs) and more often throughout the year (staggered admission and graduation times).

NURSES TOLD US...

- Experienced nurses are happy that new nurses are replenishing the workforce, but they struggle to find time to mentor them.
- Nurses want to continuously advance their knowledge.
- Nurses want to work in healthy, quality practice environments.

THE NURSING STRATEGY WILL...

- Fund dedicated time for experienced nurses to mentor new nurses (e.g., 80/20 model).
- Target funding for preceptor training.
- Continue to provide funding to support professional development for nurses – but targeted in areas that improve the quality of nurses' work environments and patient care (injury prevention, quality workplaces, team development, and clinical leadership).
- Increase the number of post-entry specialty programs, such as perioperative and critical care nursing programs.
- Fund nurse-led work improvement initiatives and support the sharing of successful innovation across the province.

NURSES TOLD US...

➤ Nurses could be doing more to meet the health needs of Nova Scotians and are frustrated with the barriers.

➤ Nurses could work more efficiently with streamlined processes and better use of support staff.

➤ It doesn't feel like the workforce is stable in some clinical specialties and rural settings.

➤ Complex problems don't have simple solutions.

THE NURSING STRATEGY WILL...

➤ Continue to focus on removing barriers that prevent nurses from working to optimal scope.

➤ Continue to support employers' efforts to ensure that the right person is doing the right work at the right time, safely and efficiently.

➤ Continue to fund the Co-operative Learning Experience Program, targeted to clinical specialties and geographic areas that are at greatest risk from anticipated retirements.

➤ Create an Innovation Fund that supports employers and communities to recruit and retain nurses for hard-to-fill positions.

➤ Will be multifaceted to meet multiple challenges, and responsive to the evolving health care needs of Nova Scotians.

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