



A SERVICE OF

nrc
HEALTH

MARCH 2023

Rural Focus

Close the Diversity and Experience Gap with Nurse Board Members

By **Krista Schumacher, Ph.D.**, Coordinator, Rural Research and Grant Development, **Chad Landgraf, M.S., GISP**, GIS Specialist, **Mary Beth Sawyer, M.B.A.**, Project Manager, and **Denna Wheeler, Ph.D.**, Executive Director and Clinical Professor, *Oklahoma State University Center for Rural Health*

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many weaknesses in U.S. healthcare systems and the nation's pervasive health inequities. It also spotlighted the vital importance of nurses, who have much to offer in terms of achieving health equity. To do so, they must be in positions of leadership, especially in the boardroom. The 2011 Institute of Medicine report *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health* highlighted the limited representation of nurses in leadership positions and advised hospitals to include nurse leaders as board members.¹ Yet most U.S. hospital and health system boards still lack a single nurse member. According to The Governance Institute's 2021 Biennial Survey of Hospitals and Healthcare Systems, less than 1 percent of respondents said they have a nurse on their board, and only 18 percent of boards without a nurse plan to add one in the future.²

What Nurses Lend to the Boardroom and Beyond

Nurses on boards can advocate for the needs and concerns of both nurses and patients.³ As team leaders, nurse buy-in is critical for the effective implementation of new policies and procedures established by the board.⁴ Nurses are typically the largest segment of a hospital's workforce and they often spend the most time with

- 1 Institute of Medicine, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*, National Academies Press, 2011.
- 2 Kathryn Peisert and Kayla Wagner, *Advancing Governance for a New Future of Healthcare*, The Governance Institute's 2021 Biennial Survey of Hospitals and Healthcare Systems.
- 3 Kimberly Harper and Laurie Benson, "The Importance and Impact of Nurses Serving on Boards," *Nursing Economic\$,* July/August 2019.
- 4 "5 Reasons Hospital Boards Need More Nurses," *Becker's Hospital Review*, December 8, 2014.

patients, which makes nurses ideal leaders in promoting community health and advocating for change at the system or policy level.⁵ In this era of value-based versus fee-for-service-based care, nurses can provide input on where funds can be used more efficiently to achieve quality outcomes and improve patient care.⁶ Nurse leaders with business backgrounds offer boards a balance of financial knowledge and direct patient care experiences, and nurses on boards of organizations with urban and rural hospitals can highlight instances where quality reporting relies too heavily on urban facilities to the exclusion of rural facilities.⁷

→ Key Board Takeaways:

Nurse representation on rural hospital and health system boards remains low, yet their voices can add value to some of the most pressing issues facing healthcare organizations today. Boards should consider the following:

- What new perspective could a nurse bring to the boardroom? For example, would it be helpful to have their voice when discussing issues related to improving quality of care, the patient experience, customer loyalty, health equity, and workforce shortages?
- How could nurse leaders help us promote community health and advocate for change at the system or policy level?
- Would considering more nurses for board and hospital leadership positions help build a bigger pipeline for potential board members or even healthcare executives?
- What mentor and training opportunities do we have to identify and educate nurses who would be great candidates for leadership roles?
- Could providing nurses with opportunities for leadership roles as board members or administrators help attract nurses to our rural hospital/health system?

5 Mary K. Wakefield, et al., *The Future of Nursing 2020–2030: Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity*, National Academies Press, 2021.

6 Pat Magrath, “Healthcare Boards Have Many Reasons to Embrace Nurse Leaders,” *Diversity Nursing*, January 16, 2017.

7 *Ibid.*

Nurses can also fill hospital leadership roles beyond the board, especially in rural communities with limited talent pools for healthcare executives. In small hospitals, high CEO turnover often leads to poor overall hospital performance.⁸ The patient care and management skills of experienced nurses make ideal qualifications for hospital C-suite positions, which can improve performance and patient outcomes. Among Oklahoma’s 40 critical access hospitals (CAHs), 18 percent have nurses serving as CEO or administrator, with one nurse CEO recently recognized by the state rural health association for her leadership and dedication to the community.

Providing nurses with opportunities for leadership roles as board members or administrators may help attract nurses to rural hospitals. Nationwide, the nursing workforce shortage is creating severe strains in the healthcare system, particularly in rural areas.⁹ Nurse leaders who adopt effective leadership styles and advocate for their nursing staff can decrease burnout and increase retention while also improving patient outcomes.¹⁰ Organizations must also consider the need for racially and ethnically diverse nurse leaders who can mentor other nurses to pursue leadership positions. Structured mentorship programs have been found to improve the diversity of nurse leaders, who can influence resource allocation and policies and reduce healthcare and workplace inequities.¹¹

→ Recommended Resources

- [The Impact of Including Nursing’s Perspective on Hospital Boards](#)
- [Involving Nurse Leaders in Governance Roles](#)
- [Nurse Leadership at Mayo Clinic: Integrating Nursing, Clinical Practice, and Interdisciplinary Education](#)

8 Mellie Bridewell and Matt Shahan, “[Rural Hospital CEO Turnover](#),” National Rural Health Association, 2020.

9 Sarah Smith, Jenny Sim, and Elizabeth Halcomb, “[Nurses’ Experiences of Working in Rural Hospitals: An Integrative Review](#),” *Journal of Nursing Management*, September 2018.

10 National Academy of Medicine, [The Future of Nursing 2020–2030: Report Brief: Fostering and Diversifying Nurse Leaders](#).

11 Wakefield, et al., 2021.

Training Opportunities for Governance

Simply including nurses on boards is not enough. Without identifying nurses who show natural abilities to lead and providing them with sufficient support to be effective board members, the inclusion of nurses on boards may be no more than an empty gesture. Several resources exist for training nurses on board governance. For example, the Oklahoma State University Center for Rural Health offers a video series on CAH Board Governance Training.¹² The Nurses on Boards Coalition offers numerous resources on its Web site, including an online educational module “Empowering Nurse Leaders to Impact the Community through Board Service.”¹³ While geared toward any community board service, the module is useful for understanding board governance in general and how nursing professional experience lends important contributions to the boardroom. The Governance Institute also has a library of board orientation resources to support nurses in learning the basics of governance.

In Closing

If your board lacks nurse representation, look within your organization to identify current or potential nurse leaders. Instead of relying on nurses to express interest, ask them to serve. A genuine desire to capture their expertise and experience, with a guarantee their voices will be heard, is likely to go further than a wait-and-see approach. Also consider recruiting from colleges and universities with nursing programs or a local public health department,¹⁴ or submit a request for nurses through the Nurses on Boards Coalition.¹⁵

If nurses are represented on your organization’s board, are their contributions welcome and valued, or are they simply filling a quota? It is critical to ensure that nurse board members feel respected and have the skills to help elevate boardroom discussions. Other hospitals and health systems are facing the same challenges of ensuring diverse board representation, so consider reaching out to your neighboring facilities to learn what they are doing well and share best practices. Collaborating

12 [Critical Access Hospital \(CAH\) Board Governance Training](#), Oklahoma State University Center for Rural Health, 2022.

13 Nurses on Boards Coalition, [Empowering Nurse Leaders](#).

14 Susan Reinhard, “Getting Nurses on Board,” AHA Trustee Services.

15 Nurses on Boards Coalition, [Find a Nurse](#).

with your colleagues is an excellent way to achieve mutually desired goals while acknowledging the critical role nurses play in healthcare and governance.

The Governance Institute thanks Krista Schumacher, Ph.D., Coordinator, Rural Research and Grant Development, Chad Landgraf, M.S., GISP, GIS Specialist, Mary Beth Sawyer, M.B.A., Project Manager, and Denna Wheeler, Ph.D., Executive Director and Clinical Professor, Oklahoma State University Center for Rural Health, for contributing this article. They can be reached at krista.schumacher@okstate.edu, chad.landgraf@okstate.edu, mary.elizabeth.sawyer@okstate.edu, and denna.wheeler@okstate.edu.

