The economic downturn has checked in at ambulatory surgery centers (ASCs), although with less impact than in hospital OR suites. More than two-thirds (69%) of ASC respondents to the 19th annual OR Manager Salary/Career Survey said the downturn had affected their staffing in the past 6 months, primarily through decreased overtime and requiring staff to take time off without pay. That compares to 80% of hospital OR leaders who reported negative staffing effects from the recession.

Most ASC leaders reported that open positions and staff turnover were about the same as a year ago. Only 5% of ASC leaders reported layoffs of direct care staff. Still, 25% of leaders found it more difficult to recruit RNs compared to a year ago.

The survey was mailed in April to 1,078 OR Manager subscribers and an external list of nurse managers of ASCs, with 259 usable responses for a response rate of 28%. The margin of error is ±5.3% at the 95% confidence level. Results from the remainder of the survey, including salaries and benefits, will appear in the October issue.

The largest group of survey respondents (46%) work in physician-owned ASCs, followed by joint venture (27%), corporate/LLC (16%), and hospital-owned (7%) facilities.

Feeling the pinch

ASC leaders are feeling the pinch from the recession. One wrote, “We are experiencing a decrease in caseload, with many of our physicians reporting their offices are ‘slow’. Most of my staff has been seeing reduced hours due to low census.” Said another, “The practice is struggling, which will trickle down to the ASC.” Another respondent reported: “Volumes are very soft, and this requires daily assessment and evaluation of staffing needs.”

The most common effect of the slow economy on ASC staffing has been reduced overtime (44%), followed by requiring staff to take time off without pay (36%), eliminating open positions (20%), and reduced use of agency personnel (13%). Most respondents (69%) indicated at least one negative effect of the economy on staffing.

One respondent wrote of “juggling the nursing schedule to keep full time [at] 32 to 40 hours.” Another noted: “No overtime. Difficult to staff busy OR; no hiring, no capital.” Yet another was personally filling in. “I have less time for management of the ASC due to having an assignment every day,” this person said. “We are going to a 4-day work week for all employees.”

Others said they had not been affected. “To date, it has had no impact, although we watch our use of agency staff closely,” one respondent said. Another said the economy had not had much of an effect, “except part-time nurses want to work full-time due to layoffs of spouses.” One manager raised the issue of changing the staffing ratio, saying, “[We] brainstorm...
ways to be more efficient and cost-effective. Techs to replace RNs?”

Size mattered when it came to effects. Leaders of ASCs with 5 or more ORs were more likely than those of smaller ASCs to require staff to take time off without pay (51% vs 31%) and to eliminate open positions (28% vs 17%).

ASC leaders of multispecialty centers were more inclined to reduce overtime (48%) compared to those in single-specialty centers (38%). And multispecialty ASC leaders were far more likely than single-specialty centers to require staff to take time off without pay (44% vs 24%) and more likely to eliminate open positions (24% vs 13%) and reduce use of contract staff (18% vs 5%).

The Northeast was significantly less affected by the economy compared to the Midwest and the South, with just half of leaders in the Northeast indicating at least one negative effect compared to 78% in the Midwest and 73% in the South, respectively. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of leaders in the West reported at least one negative effect.

“We evaluate every case for profitability, renegotiate implant costs with vendors, and limit agency use,” said one respondent.

**Staffing profile**

The percentage of budgeted open RN FTE positions in ASCs was 12%
for RNs and 15% for STs, with the average number of weeks positions had been open at 9.5 and 4.8 weeks, respectively.

The overwhelming majority of ASC leaders said open positions and staff turnover have stayed the same compared to a year ago for both RNs and STs. More than three-fourths (79%) reported no change in open RN FTE positions, 16% reported a decrease, and only 5% saw an increase. The pattern was similar for STs, with 89% of respondents saying openings stayed the same, 10% saying they had decreased, and 1% noting an increase. The average number of open positions was 0.3 (compared to 0.5 in 2008) for RNs and 0.2 for STs, the same as in 2008. The number of ASCs with no open positions remained high for both RNs (82% in 2009 vs 81% in 2008) and STs (91% in 2009 vs 83% in 2008).

RN turnover for the past year stayed the same for 78% of respondents; 14% reported a decrease, and 8% noted an increase. Again, ST turnover mirrored these results, with 87% reporting no change in turnover, 10% a decrease, and just 3% an increase.

**Recruitment**

Despite a recession, 25% of ASC leaders reported more difficulty in recruiting RNs compared to a year ago, a finding consistent across all regions. Joint venture ASCs reported more difficulty with recruitment compared to other types of ASCs. One respondent noted, “Less experienced applicants; staff working long hours due to fewer RNs.”

Overall, 15% of leaders, most of whom worked in hospital-owned ASCs, said recruitment was easier, but the majority (60%) reported it to be the same as 12 months ago. Similarly, most respondents (66%) said ST recruitment remained the same, but 19% reported increased difficulty, and 15% found recruitment easier.

**Breaking into the ASC**

New graduate nurses and RNs without OR experience face challenges when it comes to landing a job in an ASC. Only 18% of ASC leaders said they hire new graduate nurses, and 47% hire RNs without OR experience. More than half (52%) hire neither.

The hiring situation was most favorable for new graduate nurses in single-specialty ASCs in the West. More than one-fourth (28%) of ASC leaders in the West hire new graduates, compared to 13% in the South and 11% in the Northeast. However, 24% of ASCs in the West reported a decrease in the
turnover rate for RNs. The Midwest was the second most likely region to hire new graduates at 21%.

Single-specialty ASCs were significantly more likely than multispecialty centers to hire both new graduates (25% vs 13%) and RNs without OR experience (68% vs 34%).

**Under stress**

As in hospitals, the recession has taken an emotional toll of staff, according to several respondents. “It’s harder to keep staff engaged,” said one. “I work at decreasing their anxiety. I’m working harder on nontangibles so they know I value them.” Several leaders said staff were anxious about keeping their jobs and having enough hours to work. “Staff are stressed and worried about personal finances. Per diem nurses [are] taking permanent jobs; husbands’ income at risk.”

OR leaders aren’t immune to the stress. One leader said, “I’m afraid to hire people or spend any money.” Another summed up the situation as, “many challenges, more responsibilities.”

—Cynthia Saver, RN, MS

*Cynthia Saver is a freelance writer in Columbia, Maryland.*