Managing people

Older nurses: A resource too valuable to lose

The average age of a perioperative nurse is higher than the average of 47 for nurses overall. That makes retaining older nurses a critical need for OR managers.

The immediate problem has subsided in recent years because of the poor economy. Still, “We’re concerned that as soon as the economy changes and 401ks and 403bs recover, we’re going to see an outflow of nurses,” says Lil LeBlanc, MBA, SPHR, assistant vice president of HR strategy and culture at Baptist Health South Florida.

Hospitals are taking steps to meet the needs of older nurses, enhancing satisfaction and improving retention. (Like AARP, this article defines “older” as over 50.)

Retaining quality staff

Scripps Health, a Southern California health care system consistently named as one of AARP’s Best Employers for Workers over 50, provides examples of how to increase older nurses’ satisfaction, including giving nurses who are 60 years old or have worked at the hospital for 30 years the option of reducing the amount of OR call.

“If we hadn’t made the change, we would have run the risk of losing those experienced and tenured nurses,” says Donna LoCurto, BSN, MHA, RN, director of surgical services for Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla, which has 18 ORs and an annual case volume of 9,500 inpatients and 3,300 in the ambulatory surgery center.

“We wanted to retain our investment in these very good employees and give them the opportunity to work more years.” Staff of all ages accepted the change, likely because the OR Unit-based Council suggested it as a way to retain nurses.

Providing options

The staged retirement program at Scripps allows employees who want to retire gradually by reducing their work schedule to maintain medical and dental benefits with the same premiums as regular active employees. Employees age 55 and older with at least 10 years of service are eligible to continue coverage at the same premium contribution level as part-time employees. Those with at least 20 years of service may be eligible to continue coverage at the same contribution level as full-time employees.

LoCurto also taps into Scripps’ resource pool, which includes employees who can scrub, circulate, or serve as an interim educator or supervisor. Employees in the pool stay a minimum of 3 months in any of the system’s 5 campuses. Currently, LoCurto has 2 resource employees and says, “These nurses are top notch. Instead of having an agency or traveling nurse, you have someone who contributes to the esprit de corps of the OR.”

The resource pool usually allows employees on a leave of absence to return to the same position.

Scripps offers a variable work schedule to meet the needs of OR nurses. For example, schedules can be modified to meet employee needs as well as needs of the department.
Promoting a healthy lifestyle
Scripps supports a healthy lifestyle through its Wellness Program. Participants earn credits for participating in wellness challenges, online seminars, preventive exams, health living programs, and more. By completing a Wellness Assessment, one Wellness Challenge, and at least 15 credits per year, participants receive free employee-only health insurance.

Other benefits older employees value are annual contributions to retirement plans, financial planning information, family medical coverage, and long-term disability.

Maintaining a quality workforce
Innovative programs can help perioperative leaders keep older employees happy. Happy employees contribute to a workforce well positioned to achieve optimal patient and business outcomes. ✤

—Cynthia Saver, MS, RN

Cynthia Saver, a freelance writer, is president, CLS Development, Inc, Columbia, Maryland.

Reference