

N.Y. bill would require bachelor's degrees for RNs

Written by Administrator
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ALBANY — Future registered nurses with associate's degrees would have to earn bachelor's degrees within 10 years to keep working in New York under a proposed bill that seeks to raise educational standards for nurses, even as the health care industry faces staffing shortages.

The "BSN in 10" initiative backed by nursing associations and major health policy organizations aims to attack the complex problem of too few nurses trained to care for an aging population that includes hundreds of thousands of nurses expected to retire in the coming years.

But some in the health care industry worry that increased education requirements could worsen the problem by discouraging entrants into the field.

At present, most RNs have two-year associate's degrees.

No state requires a four-year degree for initial licensing or afterward, though New Jersey and Rhode Island have considered proposals similar to New York's over the past several years.

New York's measure died in committee last session, but it has bipartisan support in both chambers and could be debated as early as this month.

Demand for more skilled nurses is increasing as the population gets older and has more chronic diseases, and as the new federal health care law promises to help 32 million more Americans gain insurance within a few years.

Federal health officials have recommended upgrading nurse education to BSNs for more than a decade.

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As of 2008, about a third of RNs had bachelor's degrees or higher, according to federal statistics.

Advocates say that in addition to improving patient care, a key reason for requiring more education is to put more nurses in position to move on to jobs in administration and in-demand specialties like oncology, and to teach at nursing schools, where the average faculty age is 53.

"More and more hospitals are looking to hire BSNs, but the catch is that not that many schools offer the RN-to-BSN program or have the faculty to teach it," Sharon Shockness, an adjunct teacher at Mercy College in Westchester County, told the Associated Press (AP).

The New York bill's main sponsors, Democratic Assemblyman Joseph Morelle of Rochester and Republican Sen. James Alesi of Monroe County, said the bill is needed to further professionalize nursing.

Both serve on their respective higher education committees and represent districts that include University of Rochester Medical Center and St. John Fisher College, which have BSN programs.

In addition to helping provide future teachers, the lawmakers say the added education and critical thinking skills are needed as patient care has become more sophisticated and studies show staff with higher levels of education serve patients better.

In a memo supporting the bill, the New York State Nurses Association cites a 2003 University of Pennsylvania study that found every 10 percent increase in staffing by nurses with bachelor's degrees results in a 5 percent decrease in surgical deaths.

Current registered nurses would be exempt from the education requirement to prevent driving more nurses from the field.

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"This bill shouldn't discourage anyone at this point because it doesn't involve anyone even applying for licensure right now...and 10 years is a long time to get a degree that will give you better pay," Alesi told AP.

Alesi contends the measure will "improve the landscape of nursing" by increasing the pool of RNs who can go on to obtain master's degrees and teach.

Researchers say almost 900,000 of the nation's roughly three million licensed RNs are older than 50, and while there's been an uptick in new, younger nurses, shortages are still expected as the health care industry continues to add nursing jobs.

The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated in 2009 that almost 582,000 new RN jobs would be created by 2018.