AONL COVID-19 Insight Survey:

Primary Challenges and Best Practices Identified, Need for More Support in the Days to Come

Hunter Joslin, MA

The American Organization for Nursing Leadership (AONL) and Joslin Marketing conducted a study on the impact of COVID-19 on nurse leaders using qualitative and quantitative research. The findings identify primary challenges, best practices, permanent changes, and gaps in support between teams, organizations, state, and federal government.

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From the interviews and responses shared, an image with a thousand faces emerged. Each was unique in its trial and yet there was an underlying theme of fear, sadness, and hope. As one survey respondent stated, “This truly has been the most challenging part of my 22-year nursing career but the most rewarding.” The following data provides insight into the challenges nurses and nurse leaders have faced, with a call to the public to recognize their needs and to continue supporting them in the days to come.

SURVEY

After conducting interviews with nurse leaders from across the U.S., AONL and Joslin Marketing launched a detailed online survey. The survey was sent to 14,322 individuals, both AONL and members and non-members. 1,824 leaders completed or partially completed the survey for a response rate of 13% with a 99% confidence rate and +/- 2.82% margin of error. The survey was completed over the course of two weeks at the end of July. At the time, the initial surge of new cases was decreasing in the Tri-state region, while new cases were on the rise in Texas, Florida, Arizona, and California. The full report is available free of charge at aonl.org/covid19study.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

Of all the respondents, nearly half (49%) work in hospital, short-term acute care; 14% in health system facilities; and 9% with academic health care providers. 32% of respondents selected the role of Director, 26% selected Manager, and 20% selected Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) or Nursing Executive. The primary work setting for all respondents was 53% urban, 31% rural, and 16% suburban.

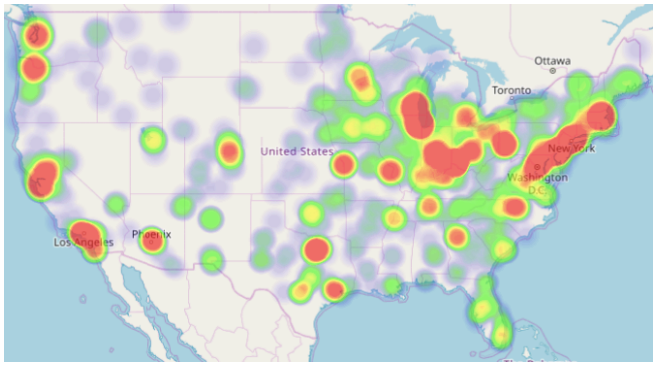

Table 1 – Respondent’s primary work setting location

INCREASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Respondents stated that nursing staff received more professional development to perform additional or new competencies to expand capacity for treating COVID-19 patients than was needed. The average respondent trained 75% of their nursing staff to treat COVID-19 patients, while only 62% was needed. At a closer look, nearly half (48%) of the

respondents said they trained 80-100% of their staff while only one quarter of respondents (22%) needed 80-100% of their staff to treat patients. Notably, there was a significant difference in perception of the nursing staff needed to treat COVID-19 patients between Managers and CNOs. 30% of Managers maintained that 80-100% of their nursing staff was needed, compared to 16% of CNOs.

INCREASED ICU BEDS

In addition to providing professional development for staff to increase capacity, 54% of applicable respondents indicated their organization had to increase ICU beds to accommodate COVID-19 patients. Similar to the variation in perception in nursing staff needed, of these respondents only 6% of Chief Executive Officers stated their organization had to increase capacity to treat COVID-19 patients.

For respondents who said their organization had to increase ICU beds, we asked them the number of days cumulatively they had to expand capacity. Nearly three-out-of-four respondents (73%) said their organization had to continue increasing ICU bed capacity for at least three weeks (20 or more days) to accommodate COVID-19 patients.

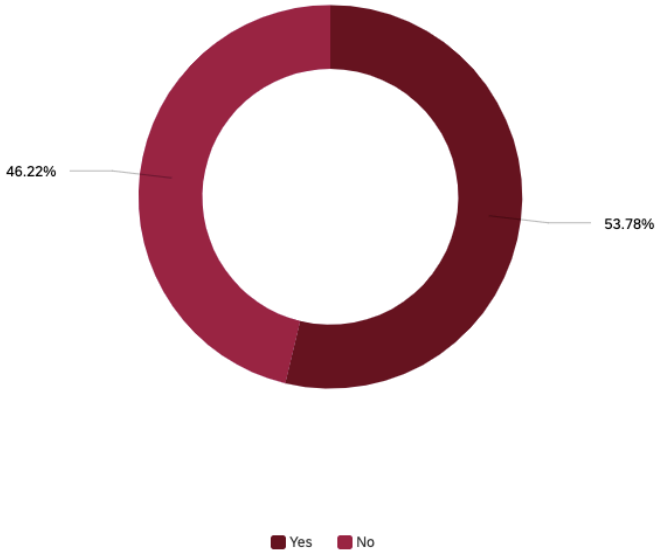

Figure 2 – Percentage of respondents whose organization had to increase its ICU beds to accommodate COVID-19 patients

TOP CHALLENGES DURING THE PANDEMIC

We gave respondents the opportunity to identify their organization's top three challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, four clear challenges were named by roughly half of all the respondents.

55% selected communicating and implementing changing policies; 54% selected surge staffing, training, and reallocation; 50% selected emotional health and wellbeing of staff; and 47% selected access to PPE and other equipment. The fifth highest challenge was staff retention, furloughs, and layoffs, which was selected by 24% of respondents.

Of the respondents who previously indicated their organization had to increase ICU bed capacity to accommodate COVID-19 patients, 69% selected "Surge Staffing, training, and reallocation" as their primary challenge, with 31% of these individuals selecting "Increased ICU beds and ventilator use."

NURSE LEADERS RATE THEIR RESPONSE TO THEIR TOP CHALLENGES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Respondents were asked to score themselves on how well they were able to respond to their three respective challenge areas, on a scale from 1-5 with 5 being very well. The mean response for the top challenges was 3.54, slightly above average. Of the top four challenges, nurse leaders indicated that they struggled the most with responding to the emotional health and wellbeing of their staff, with an average score of 3.34, or slightly above average. On the other hand, nurse leaders responded best to the increase in ICU bed shortage and ventilator use, with a rating of 3.94.

When looking at all the possible challenges, the lowest rating was a 2.83, slightly below average, which was given to sustaining academic-practice partnerships. The second lowest score was given to health inequality and social determinants of health, with a mean response rating of 2.90.

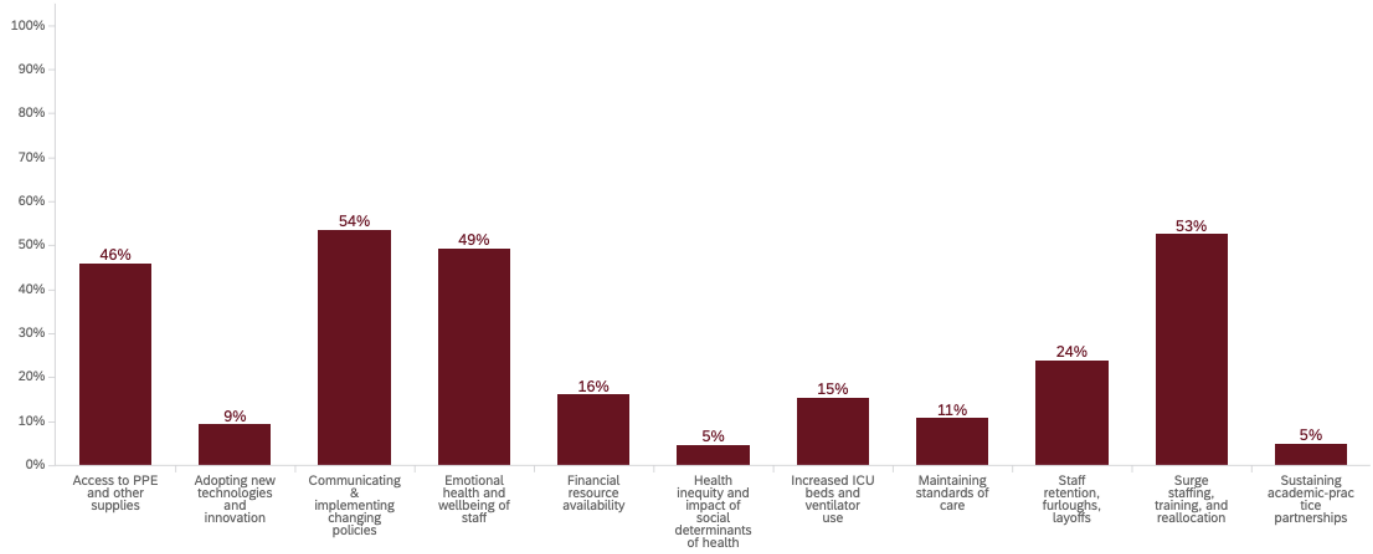

Figure 3 – Nurse leaders top three challenges during COVID-19 pandemic

BEST PRACTICES

To identify best practices, we asked respondents to offer their insight on the structures, adaptations, behaviors, and innovations that have proved most beneficial in addressing their top three challenges.

Communicating & implementing changing policies

This challenge was consistent with our interviews, where we discovered that a major frustration for nurse leaders was inconsistent messaging that led to distrust within the organization. In response to this challenge, leaders said that frequent huddles, daily updates via calls and virtual meetings, command centers, and town halls have proven helpful.

Surge staffing, training, and reallocation

Nurse leaders identified teamwork, communication of deployment and tasks, pay and bonus incentives, improved staffing models, and leadership as ways to meet surge staffing, training, and reallocation issues.

Emotional health and wellbeing of staff

The emotional health and wellbeing of staff has been a constant theme on social media and in the news as the world looks on as frontline workers labor tirelessly to respond to this unprecedented time in history. In our interviews, every leader we spoke to expressed the unique challenges they have faced through tears. From the survey, we identified that frequent communication, emotional support, rounding, chaplains, spiritual and wellness programs (such as prayer, Yoga, and Zen), teamwork, virtual meetings, leadership, listening, huddles, and one-on-one personal engagement were all effective methods used to address this serious challenge. In addition, of all the phrases and words used by respondents, “support” was mentioned more than any other as a means to address their challenges.

SUPPORT FROM TEAM, ORGANIZATION, LOCAL COMMUNITY, STATE, AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

As part of our survey, we asked respondents to rate the support they have received from their team, their organization, their local community, their state government, and the federal government, with choices ranging from far short of expectations to far exceeds expectations. By far, the top scores were given to the respondents’ teams and organizations. 81% of respondents rated the support they received from their team as having either exceeded or far exceed expectations, with 40% of them selecting far exceeded. Additionally, 72% of respondents rated the support they received from their organization as either exceeding or far exceeding expectations. Still above the middle mark was the support received

from the local community. 55% of respondents rated the support of their community as exceeding or far exceeding expectations, with another 34% selecting equal to expectations. Still, slightly above average was the rating given to the respondent's state government support with 35% selecting exceeds or far exceeds expectations, 38% selecting equals expectations, and 27% selecting short or far short of expectations. Of all the entities rated, the federal government received a much lower score. 55% of the respondents rated the support they received from the federal government as either short or far short of expectations, with 30% of respondents selecting far short of expectations. In comparison only 1% and 2% of respondents selected far short of expectations when rating the support received from their team and their organization, respectively.

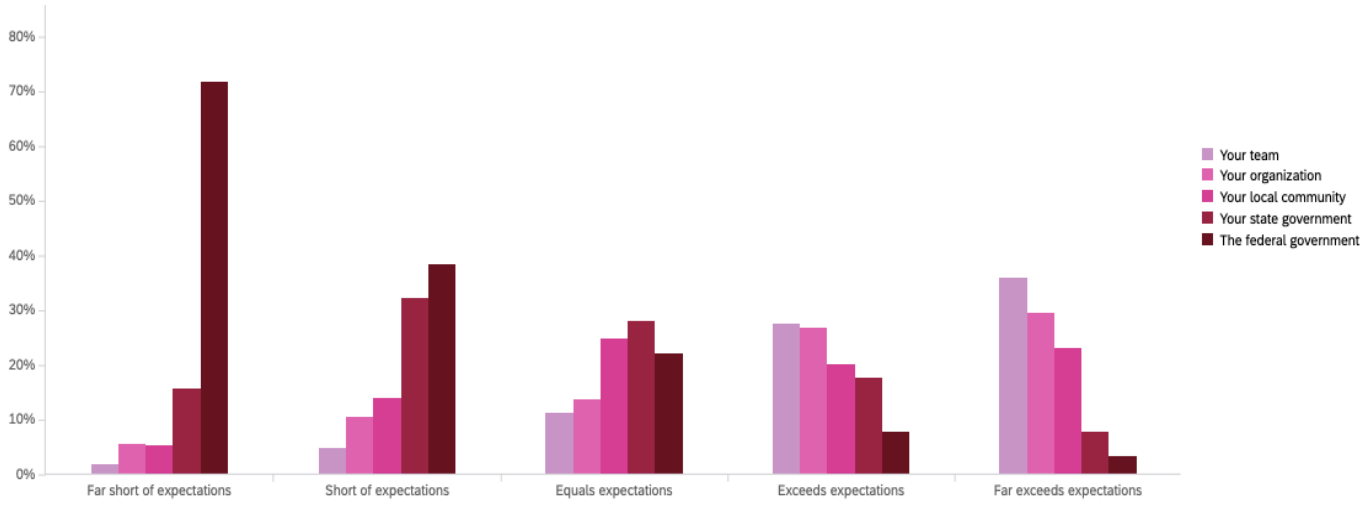

Figure 4 – Ratings of support received from the following entities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

NURSE LEADERS FEEL BETTER PREPARED FOR A FUTURE PANDEMIC OR SURGE

Looking forward, we asked respondents whether or not they felt their team was better prepared for a future pandemic or surge. 85% selected Yes, 12% selected No, and 3% selected Maybe. A subtle but statistically relevant correlation exists between respondents' rating of preparedness for a future pandemic or surge and the support received from the federal government. 70% of those who said they do not feel prepared for a future pandemic or surge rated the support they received from the federal government as short or far short of expectations, with 58% of these individuals selecting far short of expectations. 65% of those who do not feel better prepared rated the support received from their state government as short or far short of expectations, with 28% choosing far short of expectations. Conversely, of those who feel better prepared for a future pandemic or surge, 84% rated the support they received from their team as exceeding or far exceeding expectations, with 77% of them rating the support they received from their organization as exceeding or far exceeding expectations.

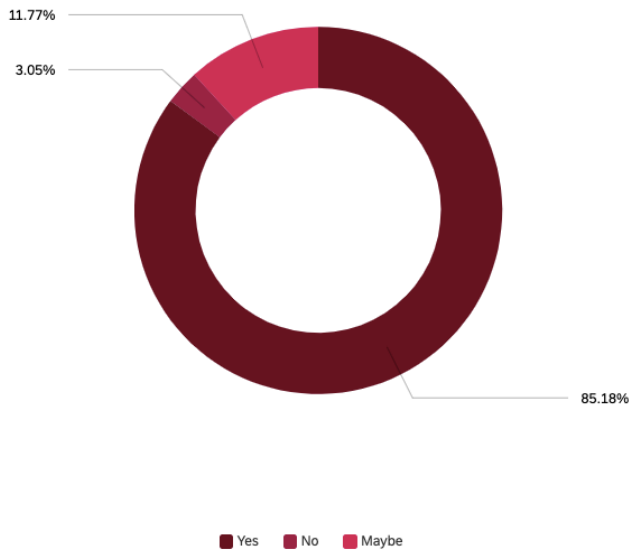

Figure 5 – Do nurse leaders feel prepared for a future pandemic or surge

TEMPORARY HEALTHCARE ADVANCEMENTS THAT WILL BE IMPORTANT TO MAINTAIN BEYOND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Going forward, organizations and nursing leaders are determining the most effective ways to deliver quality care. The stay at home standard and the subsequent decrease in elective surgeries has led to a critical juncture in healthcare as organizations look to the future. As part of our survey, we asked the respondents to identify temporary advancements – both technological and otherwise – that they believe will be important to maintain beyond the COVID-19 crisis. The top consideration by far was increased utilization of telemedicine with 43% of respondents selecting this advancement. The following three advancements all received 25% of the respondents' consideration: adoption of new staffing models, increased interdisciplinary collaboration, and wider recognition of nurses' contributions. These were followed by new protocols to streamline patient care and innovative patient care technologies, with 20% of respondents selecting these advancements.

CONCLUSION

At the end of our survey we provided respondents the opportunity to share their firsthand accounts. Each story provided eye-opening insights into the reality nurses and nurse leaders have faced on a day-to-day basis. Each story is a testament to the real impact the pandemic has had on frontline workers.

From our interviews with CNOs from across the country and from this survey of nearly 2,000 nurse leaders who replied graciously in the midst of a crisis, it is clear more than ever that nurses need to be heard and that they need to be supported by their teams, organizations, local communities, and state and federal governments in the days to come. Nurses and healthcare providers are facing a once in a century crisis but as the rest of society begins to seek out a more normal way of life, the script has not changed for nurses who go to work every day to treat and care for COVID-19 patients. Their work must not be forgotten, for they are the true heroes in a time that will forever be remembered.

"We all have pandemic plans. We worked on them during the H1N1 flu outbreak and we brushed them up for SARS, MERS and Ebola. We have leadership training and FEMA Incident Command Training. Then the real situations hit, and you realize this is not a drill. Never underestimate the amazing skill and resilience of nursing staff. They come to work and face more practice changes and new skills to acquire. They have to deal with new equipment and new PPE as supply chains faltered. They step up to challenges and support your community. Recognize them. Thank them. They are the backbone of healthcare!"

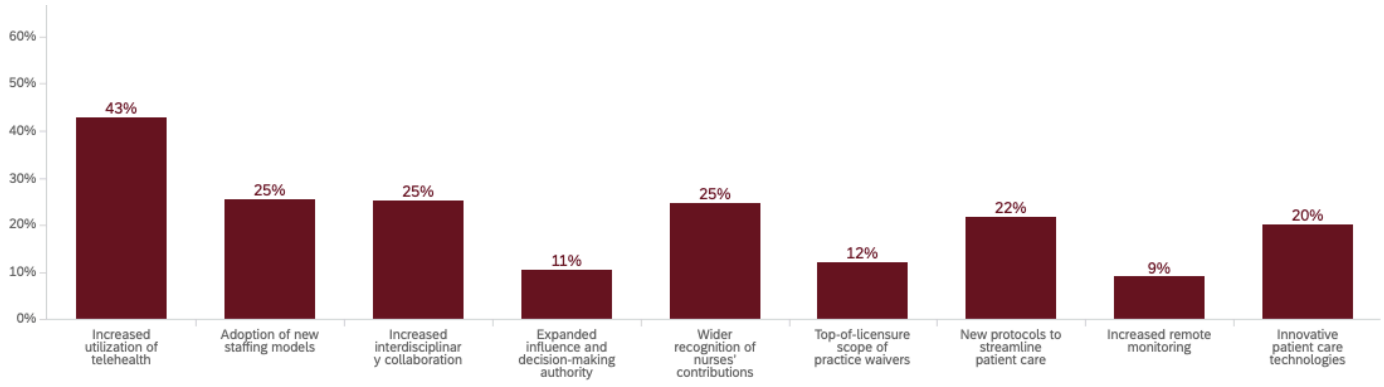

Figure 6 – Temporary advancements that will be important to maintain beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.