World-Class Care
Boston Welcome Back Center Puts Internationally Educated Nurses Back To Work

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By the time you have finished reading this page, there will be even fewer nurses to care for you and your family, no matter where you live. Bunker Hill Community College, in partnership with Roxbury and Massachusetts Bay Community Colleges and the University of Massachusetts Boston are tackling the national nursing shortage “one nurse at a time.”

We borrowed a simple idea from California, and there’s room for hundreds of other colleges and universities to pitch in: Help professional nurses who are from other countries and living here in the United States become licensed to practice nursing here. We call our program “Welcome Back,” because we are welcoming these professionals, many of whom have been stuck in low-wage jobs, back to their profession. New England is home to thousands of foreign-trained nurses who don’t know how to re-enter their profession in the United States.

In two years, the Boston Welcome Back Center has helped 47 internationally educated nurses from 29 different countries obtain licenses and return to work. The program is working with more than 400 nurses from 72 countries who are legal residents of the United States. While all were nurses in their own countries, the steps required to obtain their United States licenses, including learning English in some cases as well as miles of bureaucratic red tape, are time-consuming. An internationally educated nurse who enrolls in the Welcome Back program full-time could be licensed and working in a hospital or a clinic in as little as a year. Most, however, work part- or full-time jobs—and may need two years or more to complete the program on a part-time basis. Either way, the program puts experienced nurses to work in less time than training new nurses; the fundamental nursing credential, an R.N., takes two years of full-time study.

The Boston Welcome Back Center is a workforce development program. Staff members act as case managers helping each participant over three major hurdles to gain a nursing license in the United States. The first, credential validation, can be the most difficult as it requires getting official transcripts from nurses’ home countries. English competency must be at the level of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The final step is the National Council Licensure Examination. No two Welcome Back participants face the same issues. The Center and its partners refer nurses to a network of agencies, community organizations and churches to help each participant find the most convenient, least expensive services needed to clear the hurdles.

Participants were highly educated and experienced nurses in their homelands. Many say they want to return to their profession because nursing is their life. But multiple family and financial needs prevent most from focusing full-time on relicensing. Many Welcome Back nurses are political refugees. Others left war zones where they lost family members and friends. Using a client-centered case management approach, Welcome Back helps them find suitable English-as-a-Second Language classes and any remediation needed to restart their lives beyond nursing.

Many Welcome Back students received nursing education that varies from ours in the United States or practiced in places where the role of the nurse is different, so part of the training is to prepare them for the nature of U.S. nursing work. For example, U.S. nurses often have a level of autonomy in decision-making. Nurses from some other countries say they are often limited to following a doctor’s explicit orders. Welcome Back helps these students understand how U.S. nurses can often take the initiative in care. Or a Welcome Back participant from a developing country may have been the primary health care provider around the clock, seven days a week, for communities with hundreds and even thousands of families. One eight-hour shift a day within a prescribed discipline, such as cardiology or pediatrics, as at most U.S. jobs, constitutes a very different work environment. At the same time, some Welcome Back students bring experiences that can supplement the usual U.S. services. One current program participant who came to the United States under political asylum from Sierra Leone has extensive experience with the psychological and social rehabilitation of soldiers and families dealing with the trauma of war.

Massachusetts alone needs an estimated 5,000 nurses, and the shortage is deepening. Nurses are retiring and quitting faster than new nurses can be trained. The demand has pushed some salaries to $75,000 per year for an experienced nurse, more than what a nursing instructor earns. The small number of nurses with master’s degrees who are available and willing to teach exacerbates the overall shortage. The shortage is worsening. Everyone’s healthcare costs will rise; patient care will suffer.

There is no magic solution. The usual stopgap measures won’t work. Signing bonuses for nurses at hospitals...
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