



SAFE STAFFING IN HEALTH CARE



Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO 2022 Workers' Recovery Agenda

SB 5751 / HB 1868 would protect healthcare workers, improve care for patients, and begin to address the hospital staffing crisis.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic – for two years and counting – healthcare workers have worked tirelessly and put their own lives at risk to protect our communities. Many have done this despite being burned out and at their breaking point.

In a December 2021 poll of about 1,200 Washington healthcare workers, a staggering 84 percent of Washington healthcare workers said they feel burned out. Concerningly, 49 percent reported they're likely to leave the healthcare profession in the next few years. Among those who said they were likely to leave, 70 percent said one of the biggest reasons was short staffing.

Washington has faced a healthcare staffing shortage for years, but the pandemic further exacerbated longstanding short-staffing issues. Healthcare workers have asked hospital executives for help to make their jobs manageable and to improve safety for healthcare workers and patients, but they've been ignored.

"We cannot wait another year – we need enforceable safe staffing standards now that allow us to do our jobs safely and give patients the care they deserve," said Ademola Adeyemo, a certified nursing assistant in the surgical unit at UW Medical Center-Northwest in Seattle and a member of SEIU Healthcare 1199NW. "For years we have been sounding the alarm about chronic staffing shortages, which existed well before COVID. We need solutions now."

We request the legislature act now to establish and enforce safe staffing standards for the health and safety of everyone in Washington.

SB 5751 / HB 1868

Sen. June Robinson (D-Everett) and Rep. Marcus Riccelli (D-Spokane) have introduced bipartisan legislation to create new safe staffing standards for hospitals in Washington state, which will help protect healthcare workers and ensure patients get the care they deserve.

This legislation is strongly supported by WA Safe + Healthy campaign, a coalition of healthcare workers represented by SEIU Healthcare 1199NW, UFCW 21, and the Washington State Nurses Association.

Together, they represent more than 71,000 healthcare workers in the Washington.

HB 1868 is co-sponsored by 44 state representatives, including Rep. Mike Volz

(R-Spokane), and SB 5751 is co-sponsored by 14 state senators. These bills would finally begin to address the hospital staffing crisis by:

- **Pass safe staffing standards** to protect patients and health care workers from dangerously high patient loads and establish adequate enforcement to ensure the standards are followed. Local hospital staffing committees need to be improved to help address individual hospital approaches.
- **Enforce existing overtime and meal and rest break laws** and close loopholes to ensure our healthcare workers are getting critical break time and ending the abuse of mandatory overtime so a safe health care environment can be maintained for patients.

Similar standards have been established in other states with positive results. Healthcare workers

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in those states report better safety and better care for patients. We need the Legislature to set safe staffing standards to ensure health care workers can do their jobs safely and give patients the care they deserve, for the health and safety of everyone in Washington.

Additionally, the WA Safe + Healthy coalition will support efforts to invest in workforce development to increase the number of new healthcare workers entering the field, but healthcare workers have been clear that increasing the pipeline of new healthcare workers will only be successful alongside safe staffing standards that protect them from massive burnout once they begin working.

How will a safe staffing standard address the problem?

Healthcare workers do the work they do because they want to help people, but in no career could you expect to attract new workers by promising them they'll be overworked and burned out within a year. Safe staffing standards that ensure any one healthcare worker has a manageable patient load will begin to address the staffing crisis by reducing burnout and attracting new workers to the field.

A safe staffing standard may work for bigger hospitals, but what about smaller, rural hospitals?

Safe staffing standards determine how many patients any one healthcare worker can care for at one time. Staffing committees within each hospital determine additional staffing needs tailored to each specific hospital and unit. This is far from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach — it guarantees safe staffing for workers and better care for patients while providing flexibility based on patient care needs.

Doesn't Washington already have laws about meal and rest breaks?

Yes, thanks to advocacy from healthcare workers Washington legislators passed legislation requiring adequate meal and rest breaks and limiting the use of mandatory overtime. Unfortunately these laws were passed with good-faith compromises to the standards



“I've been a nurse for 26 years, and I've never seen so many colleagues leaving.”

They are retiring early, they are leaving to become travelers, and they have gone to less stressful jobs in clinics or freestanding surgical centers to get out of the pressure cooker that has become bedside care. This has meant that we are scrambling to cover our patients' needs – it's bad for nurses and healthcare workers, and it's bad for patients.”

— Julia Barcott, critical care nurse at Astria Toppenish Hospital and WA State Nurses Association union leader

and enforcement approach and have been abused by employers to the point where we see virtually no change before and after passage.

Healthcare workers have tried to work with hospital executives to comply with existing law to make their jobs manageable and to improve safety for healthcare workers and patients, but they've been ignored. Instead, executives continue to overwork healthcare workers who are leaving because they are burned out, which is a crisis for both workers and patients. Now, they're calling on lawmakers to help solve the staffing crisis.



In addition to Safe Staffing in Health Care, the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO is supporting a range of issues that address economic opportunity and justice. Learn more at www.wslc.org or www.TheStand.org.

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