

HEALTH

Travel nurse salaries soar, and NJ hospitals pay because they can't survive without them



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Asbury Park Press

Published 5:00 a.m. ET April 26, 2022

Working as a travel nurse at CentraState Medical Center in Freehold Township gave Deirdre Spina the flexibility she wanted to shuttle between her home in Florida and her family in New Jersey.

The job also paid her well. Really well.

"This is just the honest answer," Spina, 52, said. "The draw is the money."



The shift is a sign that a profession in high demand is flexing its power. And it is creating headaches for hospitals that have little choice but to pay the hefty asking price and hope the agency nurses will fit in seamlessly with full-time staff.

In at least one instance, the dependence on a contingent work force turned tragic.

The surge in travel nursing, experts say, is a sign that the profession is under stress. To alleviate it, New Jersey will need to train more nurses, and hospitals will need to build a culture to convince them to stay.

'It was us against the virus': What did hospital workers learn from two years of COVID?

"It's not surprising that people went to travel nursing (during the pandemic), because they had more control," said Edna Cadmus, executive director for the New Jersey Collaborating Center for Nursing, a group that tracks data. "And I think when there are times with this type of uncertainty, control is important in their lives."

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Robb Bradford had seen enough. The Toms River resident worked as a nurse for 28 years at Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune, but he said he grew weary of the corporate bureaucracy.

He ran into travel nurses at the hospital, who told him about another option. He could travel the country, make three times his salary, and, since he was only on staff temporarily, would never get caught up in the hospitals' politics.

Bradford signed up to become a travel nurse two years ago. He loaded up his RV and hit the road, lending a hand in cardiac units in Montana, Washington, Ohio, Illinois and, in his latest assignment, Reading, Pennsylvania.

Bradford, 60, said life on the road can get lonely, but he has enjoyed the change of scenery. Would he consider coming back to New Jersey and joining a staff full time?

"The problem is, I'm going to make a lot less money, so right now I'm probably going to do this for a couple more years and then probably retire," he said.



rarities. In 2019, travel nurses made up less than 2% of total nurses nationwide, according to a study published this month in the journal, *Nurse Leader*.

The dynamic changed during the pandemic. Full-time nurses began to burn out, joining workers in other stressful jobs in what was called The Great Resignation, the authors said.

There are signs they didn't leave the profession altogether. In 2020, travel nurses grew by 35%, according to the journal, *Health Affairs*.

Travel nurses can work close to home, but they need to live 50 miles away from the hospital to which they are assigned to receive a non-taxed housing stipend, according to the website TravelNursing.org.

The decision to become a travel nurse isn't always easy. When their contract is up, they need to renew or find a new job — with no certainty that either choice will be available.

Benefit packages vary, so they might not receive a retirement plan or inexpensive health insurance. And they might miss out on the sense of belonging, feeling like an outsider instead of part of the team, experts said.

Health care: New cancer treatments coming to Jersey Shore University Medical Center

One draw? Higher wages. The average travel nurse in New Jersey is paid \$3,780 a week, or \$95 an hour for a 40-hour week, which is more than twice as much as an average registered nurse working a permanent position, according to a survey by Vivian, a job site connecting the health care industry to contingent workers.

The pay difference has hit hospital budgets hard. New Jersey hospitals spent \$670 million on agency and travel nurses in 2021, up from \$222 million, or 202%, in 2020, according to the New Jersey Hospital Association, a trade group.

Among its members is CentraState. The Freehold Township hospital typically has about 1,800 nurses on staff. But as the omicron variant raced through the region during the winter, it had about 150 travel nurses filling in, said Tom Scott, chief executive officer.

The hospital spent \$28.5 million on agency nurses last year, up from \$4 million in 2019, the year before the pandemic began. And rates during that time essentially doubled, Scott said.



A broken nursing pipeline

The risk for hospitals isn't only economic. Hospitals rotating staff in and out could make it more difficult to create continuity and build a cohesive culture.

In extreme cases, hospitals have run into trouble. A travel nurse at Hackensack University Medical Center in February assaulted a patient care technician with a wrench and burned her, according to a recent lawsuit.

The travel nurse, Nicholas Pagano, was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound the next morning in Camden County.

An attorney for the technician filed a lawsuit. The complaint said the hospital failed in its obligation to protect its staff. And it said the travel nurse's agency, which wasn't identified, failed to provide "professional and competent" employees to the hospital.

Inside report: Newly released info, audio shed light on attack of hospital employee

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to our team member and her family," a spokesperson for Hackensack Meridian Health, which owns the hospital, said. "We cannot comment on pending litigation."

New Jersey isn't unique. Some 200 members of Congress wrote to the Biden administration in January, asking it to investigate travel nurse agencies for anti-competitive practices.

Closer to home, Cathy Bennett, president and chief executive officer of the New Jersey Hospital Association, said in an interview she hoped the Legislature would take up the issue in public hearings.

With nurses leaving and patients admitted with a severe illness like COVID-19, the demands on the remaining staff have only intensified, Bennett said.

"This is probably the one of the most difficult times I've ever seen for myself in the health care industry," she said.

The rising costs for travel nurses shine a spotlight on what experts said is a broken pipeline of nursing students to the labor force.



The state expects to have a deficit of 11,400 nurses by 2030, she said.

Most of the state's 48 nursing schools, however, don't have enough space or faculty to expand. Brookdale Community College in Middletown, for example, has a 1½-year wait to get into its program, the college said.

"We've got to increase the pipeline," Cadmus said. "That's the first step in all of this."

Feds: Hackensack Meridian Jersey Shore hospital broke rules in failed unionization drive
It leaves nurses like Deirdre Spina with plenty of options.

Spina was director of nursing at a hospital in Florida and decided she wanted to return to the bedside. She signed up with an agency in 2016 and began taking hospital jobs in New Jersey, where she was born and still has family.

It is a nomadic life. She stays at rented Airbnb homes and equipped her Jeep Cherokee with a shelving system where she can store extra clothes. At work, she abides by what sounds like an unwritten rule to happily fill in wherever she's needed.

But Spina said she makes twice as much as she would as a staff nurse and receives a housing allowance. And she has a flexible schedule that gives her plenty of time to work on her golf game.

She first joined CentraState 2½ years ago and has found it warm and welcoming. So she has stayed, reupping her contract, while taking an occasional hiatus to recharge.

"It has been an absolute win-win in my case," Spina said.

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