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Governor

Leslie Cooley Dismukes
Secretary

TO: Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety

FROM: Leslie Cooley Dismukes, Secretary

RE: Nurse Staffing at State Prisons Report 

DATE: August 15, 2025

Pursuant to Session 2023-134, Section 19B.2.(a) The Department of Adult Correction shall report the following information to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety by February 1, 2024, and by February 1, 2025:

- (1) The total number of permanent nursing positions allocated to the Department, the number of filled positions, the number of positions that have been vacant for more than six months, and information regarding the location of both filled and vacant positions.
- (2) The extent to which temporary contract services are being used to staff vacant nursing positions, the method for funding the contract services, and any cost differences between the use of permanent employees versus contract employees.
- (3) A progress report on the implementation of its plan to (i) reduce the use of contract services to provide nursing in State prisons and (ii) attract and retain qualified nurses for employment in permanent positions in State prisons.

Report attached.

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Nursing Staffing at State Prisons

By 2033, North Carolina is predicted to experience a shortage of over 12,000 nurses. Currently the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction faces a nursing vacancy rate of greater than 44%. The challenge of recruiting and retaining nursing staff in a correctional environment has been exacerbated by high vacancy rates, mandatory overtime, staff burn out and staff choosing to leave the profession. Additionally, the agency continues to have difficulty with maintaining the pace of increasing market salaries for nursing staff making it impossible to compete with more lucrative nursing opportunities offered by community partners.

Over the past year, with increased agency nurse pay rates, the Department has been able to mitigate the nursing shortage. The lucrative pay of the current contract has created an imbalance of staff working through 3rd party vendors. Although this approach is costly, it is essential to maintain safe care of our offender population.

Although this report focuses on staffing, technology and automation strategies are also being applied to meet patient care needs.

(1) The total number of permanent nursing positions allocated to the Department, the number of filled positions, the number of positions that have been vacant for more than six months, and information regarding the location of both filled and vacant positions.

For this report, data includes both Registered Nurse (RN) and Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) positions as of 12/31/24. As shown in Table 1, there were 445 permanent nursing positions in these classifications within the Department, with 185 positions (42%) vacant for more than six months. This marks a 4% improvement from last year, partly due to the abolishment of 15 positions in 2024. Nursing Services requires 604 RNs and LPNs to meet its patient care needs.

Additionally, S.L. 2017-57 mandated the reduction of 196 nursing FTEs, contributing to a 24% decrease in permanent full-time nursing positions over the past two years. While positions are being abolished, the need to fill these roles remains critical to providing care for offenders. As a result, the gap must be filled by contract nurses to ensure NCDAC meets its constitutional mandate.

Table 1

Facility	Licensed Practical Nurse			Registered Nurse		
	Total Permanent Positions	Total Filled Positions	Total Vacant > 6 Months	Total Permanent Positions	Total Filled Positions	Total Vacant > 6 Months
AC ADMIN HR OPS Recruitment				1		1
Albemarle Correctional Institution	3	1	2	4	2	2
Alexander Correctional Institution	8	2	6	10	7	2
Anson Correctional Institution	6	3	2	4	3	
Avery-Mitchell Correctional Institution	4	2	1	5	2	1
Bertie Correctional Institution	1		1			
Brown Creek Correctional Institution	1	1		2	1	1
Caldwell Correctional Center	1	1		1	1	
Carteret Correctional Center	1	1		1	1	
Caswell Correctional Center	2		2	4	2	1
Catawba Correctional Center	1	1		1	1	
Central Prison Health Complex	56	26	26	34	12	21
Columbus Correctional Center	1	1		2	2	
Comp. Health Services - Behavioral Health				2	1	
Comp. Health Services - Medical Services	4	3	1	6	5	1
Craggy Correctional Center	2	1	1	3	2	1
Craven Correctional Institution	5	3	2	5	2	3
Davidson Correctional Center	1					
Eastern Correctional Institution	1		1	3	1	2
Foothills Correctional Center	6	3	2	5	3	1
Forsyth Correctional Center	1	1				
Franklin Correctional Center	1		1	2	2	
Gaston Correctional Center				1	1	
Granville Correctional Institution	3	2	1	4	2	1
Greene Correctional Institution	4	1	3	3	1	2
Harnett Correctional Institution	4	2	2	3		3
Hyde Correctional Institution				2	1	1
Johnston Correctional Institution	3	1	2	3		1
Lincoln Correctional Center				2	1	
Lumberton Correctional Center	3	1		2		1
Marion Correctional Institution	6	3	3	7	7	
Maury Correctional Institution	5	4		7	2	5
Mountain View Correctional Institution	2	1	1	5	3	2
Nash Correctional Institution	4	4		6	2	4
NC Corr Inst. For Women	22	14	7	20	8	11
Neuse Correctional Institution	3	1	2	1		1
New Hanover CC	3	3		3	1	2
North Piedmont CRV				1		1
Orange Correctional Center	1		1	1		1
Pamlico Correctional Institution	2	1	1	3	2	1
Pasquotank Correctional Institution	5	2	2	1	1	
Pender Correctional Institution	6	3	3	5		4
Piedmont Correctional Institution	10	7	3	6	3	2
Randolph Correctional Center	1		1	2	1	1
Richmond Correctional Institution	2		2	1	1	
Robeson CRV				1	1	
Rutherford Correctional Center	1	1		1	1	
Sampson Correctional Center	2		2	2	2	
Sanford Correctional Center	1	1				
Scotland Correctional Institution	13	7	6	6	3	2
Southern Correctional Institution	5	4	1	5	2	3
Tabor Correctional Institution	5	5		8	7	
Tyrrell Prison Work Farm	1	1		3	2	1
Wake Correctional Center	1		1	1		1
Warren Correctional Center	3	1	2	3	2	1
Western Correctional Center for Women	1		1	2	1	1
Wilkes Correctional Center				1	1	
Grand Total	228	120	95	217	109	90
Grand Total 2023	237	119	101	223	101	109
Grand Total 2022	246	122	83	263	152	79
Grand Total 2021	241	161	35	259	173	58

(2) The extent to which temporary contract services are being used to staff vacant nursing positions, the method for funding the contract services, and any cost differences between the use of permanent employees versus contract employees.

Temporary contract nursing services are sourced through two methods. Temporary staff are sourced from the state's contracted temporary employment agency, Temporary Solutions, who may be employed for eleven (11) consecutive months before they are required to take a 31-day break. Prisons contract nurses are sourced from twenty-one (21) competitively-bid vendors that provide nursing staff on a short-term, 13-week, contract basis. These contract and temporary positions are paid at hourly rates and are funded by department lapsed salaries.

It should be noted, because contract and temporary nurses may only work on a short-term basis, it inhibits the ability for these employees to assume all responsibilities of a full-time employee. The 31-day break temporary staff are required to take annually, creates a staffing burden for the Department. As a result, the duties assigned to contract and temporary staff employees are less involved and very limited to performing the most basic needs necessary for patient care.

Table 2 below illustrates the distribution of temporary contract services used to fill vacant nursing positions. The use of contract nurses increased by 26% in 2024, primarily due to sustained high agency nurse pay rates. This trend underscores that competitive compensation allows the department to effectively recruit nursing staff.

Table 2

December	Total 2021	Total 2022	Total 2023	Total 2024
Contracted Nurses/ Temporary Solution Nurses	214	131	242	305

Table 3 and Table 4 below show the cost differences between the use of permanent employees versus contract employees for both registered nurses and licensed practical nurses, respectively. For permanent nurses, estimates include the current benefit value of 30.54% for Social Security and Retirement Contributions. There is a notable gap between the salaries for both registered and licensed practical contracted nursing staff and permanent, full-time nursing staff. This disparity, while necessary to compete in the contractual nursing market, continues to impact the ability to retain, recruit and hire permanent nursing staff.

Table 3

Registered Nurse Average Pay	Average Hourly Rate 2022	Annualized Rate 2022	Average Hourly Rate 2023	Annualized Rate 2023	Average Hourly Rate 2024	Annualized Rate 2024
Contracted Nurses	\$57.39	\$119,371	\$87.00	\$180,960	\$87.00	\$180,960
Permanent Nurses	\$33.15	\$68,949	\$37.10	\$74,262	\$39.32	\$81,782
Cost Difference	\$24.24	\$50,422	\$49.90	\$106,968	\$47.68	\$99,178

Table 4

Licensed Practical Nurse Average Pay	Average Hourly Rate 2022	Annualized Rate 2022	Average Hourly Rate 2023	Annualized Rate 2023	Average Hourly Rate 2024	Annualized Rate 2024
Contracted Nurses	\$42.66	\$88,732	\$64.00	\$133,120	\$64.00	\$133,120
Permanent Nurses	\$24.83	\$51,656	\$25.40	\$52,823	\$27.66	\$57,530
Cost Difference	\$17.83	\$37,076	\$38.60	\$80,297	\$36.34	\$75,590

According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the average annual salary for correctional nurses, classified under the broader category of registered nurses (RNs), is \$94,480, equating to an hourly wage of \$45.42. It is acknowledged that such compensation varies significantly based on factors such as professional experience, requisite credentials, geographic location, and the nature of the employing facility.

The BLS projects a 9% growth in the employment of RNs between 2020 and 2030, a rate that exceeds the average growth projection for all occupations by 1%. This statistic underscores the critical demand for qualified nursing professionals, including those working in correctional facilities.

Despite this demonstrated demand, a 2024 report from ZipRecruiter ranks North Carolina among the lowest-paying states for correctional nursing professionals, initially placing it 53rd nationwide. Even with subsequent salary adjustments in the fall of 2024, North Carolina improved marginally to rank 49th. This persistently low ranking demonstrates a significant disparity when compared to national averages and highlights the economic disadvantage experienced by correctional nurses in the state.

The comparatively lower salary in North Carolina poses potential detriments, including challenges in attracting and retaining skilled professionals, exacerbating workforce shortages, and increasing workloads for existing staff. These issues impose a significant financial burden on the correctional system due to the increased reliance on agency nurses, while simultaneously raising broader concerns regarding the quality and continuity of care delivered within the system.

With 181 RNs, 106 LPNs, 2 CNAIs currently and 1260 contracts in 2024, the overall spend in 2024 for agency nurses was \$50,658,247.

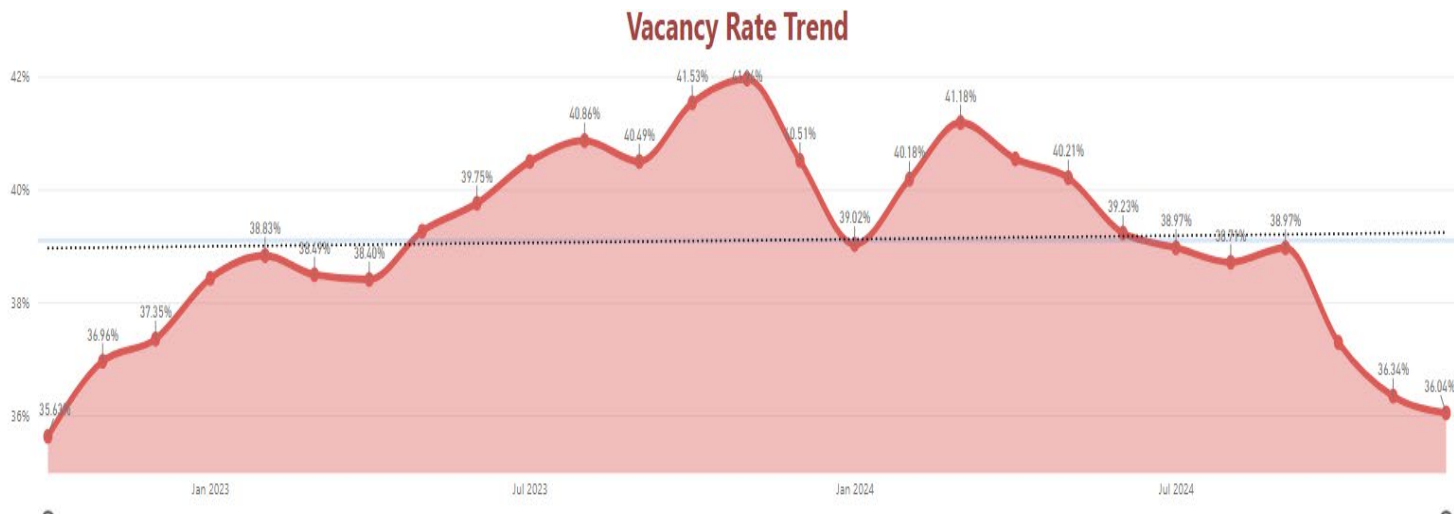
Furthermore, the number of temporary staff providing direct patient care outweighs permanent staff. The imbalance of knowledge and experience and the high rate of turnover creates instability within the work unit and directly impacts patient care.

(3) A progress report on the implementation of its plan to (i) reduce the use of contract services to provide nursing in State prisons and (ii) attract and retain qualified nurses for employment in permanent positions in State prisons.

Nursing leadership approves the use of contract services at facilities based on staffing standards on current vacancies. The vacancy rate and subsequently travel nurse approvals are adjusted to meet patient care needs. Other strategies such as float pool nurses and reduction in hours of services at facilities were utilized in the past. Due to the increasing vacancy rate system wide, there has been a continued increase in the utilization of travel nurse approvals to maintain health care services at our facilities across the state.

Graph 1 illustrates a downward trend in the vacancy rate, decreasing from 39.02% in January 2024 to 36.04% in December 2024. This decline resulted from a net gain of 13 nursing staff members in CY 2024, combined with the abolishment and repurposing of 16 positions.

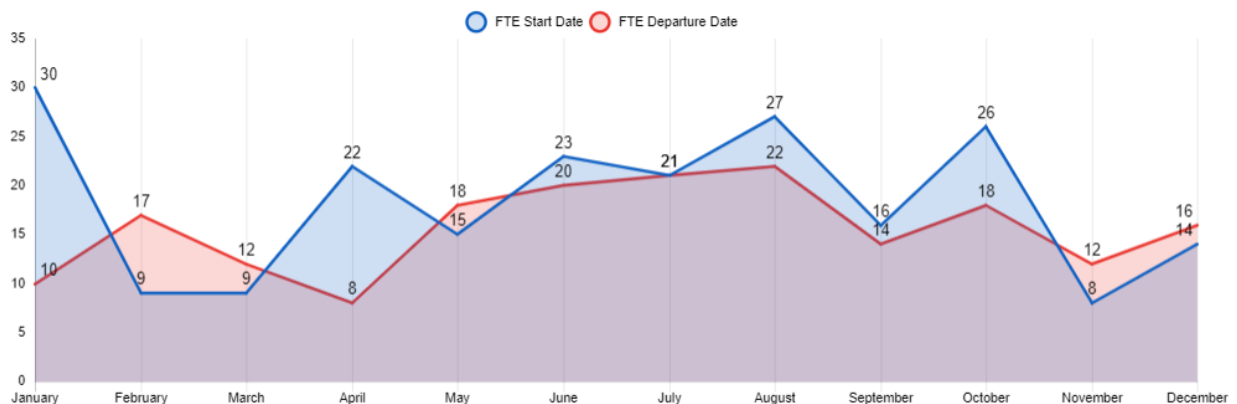
Graph 1 Nursing Vacancy Rates 2024



Graph 1 below demonstrates the rate at which the Department fills and separates nursing and health care support staff.

Graph 2

FTE Monthly Start vs Departure 2024



Current Efforts to Reduce Nurse Vacancies

Below is a summary of efforts currently underway to help reduce nursing vacancies. Some of these initiatives will require additional funding or higher authority approvals and therefore further fiscal analysis, to expand or continue.

Regional Recruiters for Healthcare Professional Positions

In 2024, NC DAC Nursing Services strengthened its recruitment team with two key additions, each bringing unique and valuable expertise:

- A full-time HR Consultant II focused on candidate sourcing and representing the department at job fairs and hiring events.
- A Temporary HR Consultant dedicated to improving the hiring process to enhance efficiency and effectiveness.

Together, this team contributed to a 45% increase in scheduled interviews. Additionally, the implementation of NeoGov's self-scheduling feature streamlined the interview process, reducing the time from application to interview. This innovation shortened the overall hiring timeframe from 82 days to 57 days.

As a result of these efforts, Nursing Services increased its monthly average of new hires and internal transfers from 12.75 in 2023 to 20 in 2024, significantly enhancing staff capacity and improving operational efficiency.

RN New Graduate Program Overview

Launched in September 2017, the RN New Graduate Program has been instrumental in attracting nurse graduates to careers in correctional nursing. The program targets senior nursing students and recent graduates who are either licensed as Registered Nurses in North Carolina or eligible to practice in the state under a compact/multi-state license within six months of submitting their state employment application.

Eligible applicants can apply, interview, and receive a contingent offer of employment, conditional upon successful graduation and licensure. If an applicant fails to graduate or obtain licensure within six months of their application date, the contingent offer is rescinded, and reapplication is required upon licensure.

To enhance competitiveness, a new base salary for new graduates was established in 2004, positioning North Carolina Department of Adult Correction (NC DAC) as a more attractive employer in the nursing field.

Looking ahead to 2025, the Health Care Recruiter will prioritize developing targeted strategies to attract new graduate nurses, strengthening HR policies, and improving the recruitment and onboarding process to better meet the needs of this key market.

Nurse Preceptor Program

In an ongoing effort to recruit top talent and cultivate new staff in health care, NC DAC Nursing Services launched a Clinical Nursing and Allied Health Preceptor Program in the fall of 2024. Four Regional Nurse Preceptors were hired to spearhead this initiative, tasked with promoting correctional nursing through class presentations at community colleges, building relationships with nursing faculty, and supporting clinical experiences at NC DAC prison sites.

The response from educational partners has been overwhelmingly positive, with many eager to establish clinical rotations at our facilities. The program is active and expanding, with over 25 nursing students from more than seven community colleges participating in clinical experiences with the Department.

This program is poised to play a pivotal role in introducing new health care professionals to the specialized field of correctional nursing, strengthening the pipeline of skilled workers dedicated to this essential area of practice.

Enhanced Temporary Solutions Pay Rates

Temporary Solutions roles are structured as 11-month, unbenefited contracts. This design provides the flexibility needed to meet dynamic staffing requirements while offering an attractive opportunity for skilled professionals. By offering competitive pay rates, we can attract top talent without incurring the additional costs associated with benefits, thereby maintaining fiscal efficiency.

The NC Department of Adult Correction Nursing Services faces a 44% vacancy rate. Currently the agency utilizes fewer than 50 Temporary Solutions staff. In contrast, staffing agencies, which offer more attractive pay rates, have supplied over 300 staff members to support patient care.

The NC Department of Adult Corrections realizes a financial savings of 30% when hiring nurses through Temporary Solutions contracts rather than agency contracts. Considering a workforce of 300 agency nurses, this represents significant cost efficiency. Additionally, the longer 11-month contract term, compared to the typical 13-week agency assignment, reduces turnover rates and the associated costs of onboarding new staff. This increased continuity also enhances the quality of patient care.

The newly established rates for 2025 are a strategic investment designed to attract, retain, and transition top talent in a cost-effective and sustainable manner. By adopting these rates, we can achieve long-term financial benefits, reduce turnover, and improve the overall quality and stability of our workforce.

Table 5

Discipline	New Rate Less than 5 years' experience	New Rate More than 5 years' experience
Medical Records Assistant	\$20 / hr.	N/A
Health Care Technician I	\$20 / hr.	N/A
Health Care Technician II	\$22 / hr.	\$24 / hr.
Medical Assistant	\$24 / hr.	\$26 / hr.
Licensed Practical Nurse	\$35 / hr.	\$40 / hr.
Registered Nurse	\$45 / hr.	\$50 / hr.

Nurse Floating/Rotating Staff Pool

The Department has increased the use of floating/rotating registered nurse pools in all regions of the state to assist with and provide relief with the day-to-day vacancies at prison facilities. Float nurses are trained in nursing operations at all acuity and custody levels to allow for the provision of nursing assistance where most critical at prisons within their geographic area. This retention program is intended to minimize or mitigate job burnout and offer the float nurse a variety of assignments in different specialty areas.

Sign-on and Retention Bonus Program

An expansion of the sign-on bonus program was approved by OSHR and implemented in April 2022. This expansion included all prison facilities and offered higher bonus amounts to remain competitive and attract additional candidates. Since its inception in 2021, DAC has since expanded sign on bonus to all DAC facilities.

The Department funds this program using lapsed salaries as follows:

Classification	Job Code	Bonus Amount
Charge Nurse	32000607	\$10,000
Health Care Technician I	32000600	\$1,500
Health Care Technician II	32000601	\$2,000
Licensed Practical Nurse	32000608	\$4,000
Registered Nurse	32000653	\$10,000

Paid sign on bonus:

Licensed Practical Nurse		
Year	Count of Employees Paid	Total amount paid
2024	29	\$46,000
2023	10	\$20,000
2022	16	\$32,000
2021	2	\$3,000
Registered Nurse		
Year	Count of Employees Paid	Total amount paid
2024	56	\$215,833.64
2023	27	\$135,000.00
2022	22	\$107,500
2021	3	\$6,500

Flexible Shift Scheduling

During 2022, many facilities converted their nursing shifts to 12 hours to meet employee job satisfaction goals. To further meet employee job satisfaction goals, nursing services will move forward with offering employee self-scheduling in 2023. Nursing services offers staff a variety of shift options where feasible including 8-hour, 10-hour, and 12-hour and weekend options.

Student Loan Forgiveness/Grants

As a potentially significant recruitment and retention tool, DAC is committed to pursuing all opportunities available to participate in student loan forgiveness/grants programs, including those available through the US Health Services and Resources Administration (HRSA) and others, for new graduate nurses who work in approved facilities in rural or hard to recruit for geographic areas. In 2023, HRSA approved additional sites for loan reimbursement. The agency has promoted the program on advertisements and other communications. The DAC Healthcare Recruiter will work to get other qualifying locations approved and continue to seek approval for additional sites once on boarded.

Proposed Efforts to Reduce Nurse Vacancies

Assistive Personnel

Over the past three years, Nursing Services has successfully recruited Medical Assistants to join our Unlicensed/Allied Health Team. This previously untapped talent pool provides a valuable and versatile resource to the agency. These professionals hold an Associate's Degree in Medical Assisting and/or a Medical Assisting Certification, which equips them with an advanced skill set. As a result, this team functions at a level between that of a Certified Nursing Assistant II (Health Care Technician IIs) and a Licensed Practical Nurse. Currently, they are classified as Health Care Technician IIs within the agency.

Given their higher skill set and ability to supervise other unlicensed personnel, Nursing Services will seek reclassification of Medical Assistants. Offering higher pay and greater job satisfaction will provide a competitive advantage in recruitment and foster improved retention of these professionals.

Expedited Salary Approval for Registered Nurses and Licensed Practical Nurses

During 2021, salary delegation for Registered Nurse and Licensed Practical Nurse position salaries was approved by DPS Human Resources to be managed at the Division of Prisons level. This delegation eliminated steps in the hiring process reducing the time between the nurse's interview and the Conditional Offer of Employment. Additionally, during hiring events at multiple sites across the state, a same day or up to 72-hour salary approval approach was utilized. Offering a salary with this short turnaround time assisted in securing candidates and start dates quickly. As the Department of Adult Correction reshapes its Human Resource Division, **salary delegation, some over budget and equity approvals should be considered at Division of Health Services levels to expedite salary offers and shrink the number of days from interview to offer.**

In-range Adjustment for all nursing classes

To remain competitive with community health care providers, correct internal equity issues and address compression through labor market salary increases, a 3% across-the-board pay increase has been proposed for all nursing staff. A higher base pay for current staff will have an impact on retention of experienced staff and assist with stabilizing the workforce.

Enhanced Sign-on and Retention Bonus Program

To remain competitive with community and local health care providers, an analysis of current sign-on bonuses is recommended. DAC has increased sign-on bonuses for most job classes to as much as \$7,000 and \$10,000, but nursing sign-on bonuses have not increased since inception. Offering higher sign-on bonuses could attract additional talent, helping to fill the more than 300 vacant positions currently within the agency.

Retention Bonus Program

In 2024, Nursing Services experienced a 20.63% turnover rate. Establishing stay incentives would mitigate the turnover rate and support net gains in staffing.

Table 6 Employee Turnover – Nursing

Separations	Separation Rate	External Agency Transfers	Turnover (Separations and External Transfers)	Turnover Rate (Separations & External Transfers)	Internal Transfers	Internal Transfer Rate	Active Employees (end of selection period)
89	18.74%	9	98	20.63%	15	3.16%	475

Private sector health care providers have successfully enhanced their recruitment efforts by coupling sign-on bonuses with retention bonuses, creating a more sustainable workforce. The Office of State Human Resources (OSHR) provides provisions for retention bonuses as an effective tool to retain employees when an agency is offering sign-on bonuses to attract qualified candidates for critical positions facing labor market shortages.

Given the ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified nursing staff, it is strongly recommended that a retention bonus be offered to all full-time nursing staff in exchange for an 18-month commitment. This initiative would serve as a strategic measure to stabilize the workforce, particularly by retaining experienced and trained employees who are crucial to maintaining quality care.

The success of retention bonus programs in the private sector, particularly at leading health care institutions like UNC and ECU hospital systems, further underscores the effectiveness of such initiatives. These organizations already offer retention bonuses that are double or even triple the value of their sign-on bonuses, demonstrating their commitment to employee retention and the long-term stability of their workforce. By adopting a similar approach, NC DAC could ensure greater staff retention, reduce reliance on costly contract nurses, and foster a more stable and skilled workforce.

Table 7

Classification	Number of Filled Positions	Bonus Amount	Cost
Health Care Technician I	34	\$1,500	51,000
Health Care Technician II	149	\$2,000	298,000
Licensed Practical Nurse	121	\$4,000	484,000
Registered Nurse	375	\$10,000	3,750,000
Retention Bonus Costs			4,583,000
Ineligible new hire RN	(107)		(\$1,070,000)
Ineligible new hire LPN	(57)		(\$228,000)
Ineligible new hire HCTII	(27)		(\$54,000)
Ineligible new hire HCTI	(11)		(16,500)
Net Cost			3,212,500

*not all filled positions would qualify based on OSHR guidelines

Career Progression

In 2025, nursing services will submit a proposal for career progression and seek support and approval for reclassifications to support career progression. This will include RNs, LPNs, Health Care Technicians and Medical Records Staff. The Career Progression Program tracks are self-paced structured training

programs that will enhance clinical skills, leadership skills and prepare employees for career advancement.