

WSNA Position: Mandatory Staffing Plan Adherence and Break Coverage Compliance

The Washington State Nurses Association supports full implementation and enforcement of Washington's hospital staffing laws and adherence to approved staffing plan requirements for the entirety of each shift.

Washington law requires hospitals to implement staffing plans developed by the Hospital Staffing Committee (HSC) and to assign personnel in accordance with those plans. Meal and rest breaks are legally required and foreseeable elements of hospital operations and must be accounted for in staffing plan implementation. (The sole exception is unforeseeable emergent circumstances, as defined in law.)

The HSC is also mandated by statute to develop a process to examine and respond to staffing complaints submitted by nursing staff. This responsibility includes reviewing complaints where patient care unit nursing assignments fall below minimum staffing standards or there are unsatisfactory shift-to-shift adjustments. Variations in nurse staffing levels—including staffing deficits below matrix requirements during meal and rest break periods—are subject to the Hospital Staffing Committee's formal complaint review, data tracking, and resolution processes. Nurse staffing complaints that remain unresolved for greater than 60 days without an extension approved by a majority vote of the HSC may be filed (as a complaint) with the Department of Health (DOH).

Consistent with guidance issued by the Department of Health (DOH) regarding staffing plan compliance, the WSNA's position is that staffing levels established in an approved hospital staffing plan must be maintained throughout the shift, including during meal and rest break periods.

WSNA opposes "break buddy" systems and any other planned staffing, patient coverage, or break-relief model that results in fewer direct-care nursing staff providing patient care during meal and rest breaks than required by the staffing plan. If the number of direct-care nursing staff falls below staffing plan requirements at any time during the shift, the unit or department is not operating in accordance with the staffing plan as required by law.

Regardless of terminology, staffing arrangements that reduce direct-care nursing staff below staffing plan requirements during meal or rest breaks are inconsistent with staffing plan compliance. To ensure data integrity, any instance in which a unit falls below the approved staffing matrix must be tracked as instances of non-compliance.

Further, it is the responsibility of Hospital Staffing Committee co-chairs to assess the validity of the hospital's semiannual compliance data before it is submitted to the Department of Health (DOH). If the hospital's tracking methodology inaccurately captures or omits occurrences of nurse staffing non-compliance with minimum staffing standards caused by break relief or other practices, the direct care nursing co-chair must mark the report as unvalidated or contested. This formal notification alerts the DOH to initiate an investigation into the accuracy of the hospital's staffing metrics.

Definition

Break buddy: A staffing arrangement in which responsibility for a nurse's patient assignment is temporarily added to another nurse's assignment during a meal or rest break.