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By Assemblymember Morelle

S2553-A

By Senator Alesi

AN ACT to amend the Education Law, in relation to the educational preparation for the practice of professional nursing

The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) supports the above-referenced legislation which would require registered nurses (RNs) who do not have a bachelor's degree, who are not currently licensed or enrolled in nursing school, to attain a bachelor's degree in nursing within ten years of their initial licensure as a requirement for re-registration to practice in New York State. This legislation adds an amendment to subsection 6905, subdivision (2) of the Education Law and was modeled after the education requirement for public school teachers in New York State, which requires teachers to earn a master's degree within five years of their initial certification.

Since the introduction of associate degree programs in the 1950s, thousands of nurses have entered the profession through this level of education. Associate degree programs prepare graduate nurses to take the NCLEX-RN (National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses) and to practice as competent, entry-level nurses. However, a position statement issued in 2000 by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, stresses the importance of nurses obtaining a baccalaureate noting that, the "Veteran's Administration, the nation's largest employer of registered nurses, has established the baccalaureate degree as the minimum preparation its nurses must have for promotion beyond entry-level."

Research-based evidence shows that in hospitals where there are higher proportions of nurses educated at the baccalaureate level, surgical patients experienced lower mortality and lower failure-to-rescue rates (Aiken, et al. 2003). Specifically, the evidence shows that for every 10 percent increase in the proportion of staff nurses with baccalaureate degrees, there is a 5 percent decline in mortality and failure-to-rescue of patients that experience post-surgical complications (Aiken, et al, 2003). This improvement in quality and patient safety represents compelling evidence that justifies the adoption of this legislation.

Bachelor's degree programs provide additional emphasis and exposure in areas of nursing theory, the utilization of evidence-based nursing practice, and community and public health issues. The increasing complexity of technology, medications and treatments, and a higher incidence of chronic health conditions across the age continuum underscores the need for nurses to continue their education. A strong foundation in the liberal arts and sciences strengthens the critical thinking skills needed for safe, culturally competent care, as well as providing additional intellectual resources to draw upon. The baccalaureate curriculum provides students with leadership skills that enable them to better supervise and monitor dependent practitioners such as licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and unlicensed assistive personnel (UAP).

The Institute of Medicine–Robert Wood Johnson Foundation report on *The Future of Nursing* (2010) states as one of its four key messages, that "nurses should achieve higher levels of education and training through an improved education system that promotes seamless academic progression" (*Report Brief*, p. 2). Nurses increasingly work in collaboration and coordination with other healthcare professionals and as their clinical, technical and non-clinical roles expand, they must attain competencies in areas such as community health, public health, geriatrics, research, leadership, and systems improvement if they are to deliver high-quality care. The Institute of Medicine report recommends that by 2020, 80% of RNs possess a bachelor's degree in nursing.

The majority of nursing graduates in NYS do not earn a baccalaureate as their initial nursing degree. Data from the State Education Department indicates that if not required to do so through the above-referenced legislation, only 33% of diploma-prepared RNs and only 25% of associate's-prepared RNs will continue their education and earn a higher degree. The Center for Health Workforce Studies at the University at Albany, School of Public Health reports that the current economic environment has created a "competitive nursing job market" (2009). There is evidence that the present economy has mitigated the nursing shortage and that acute care facilities, taking advantage of a large pool of nurse applicants, are preferentially hiring baccalaureate-prepared RNs. Significantly, the North Shore-LIJ hospital system now requires newly hired nurses to either hold a bachelor's degree in nursing, or to earn one within five years.

We should not allow the marketplace to generate a two-tier healthcare system that places bachelor's-prepared RNs in acute care facilities and associate's and diploma-prepared RNs in sub-acute facilities, nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. This development will not benefit patient care, nor is it acceptable for the profession of nursing. All patients and residents should have access to a well-educated, highly-prepared workforce.

There will be an increased need for health-related services resulting from an aging population, an expansion in access to health services resulting from healthcare reform efforts, an aging nursing workforce, and a challenging work environment that contributes to high rates of nurse turnover. The median age of RNs in New York State, based on survey data from 2007- 2010, is 50 years old. The nurses that will be affected by this legislation, those not yet practicing and not yet enrolled in nursing programs will be required to earn their bachelor's degree within ten years of their initial licensure.

Policy makers must think strategically about confronting the impending challenges facing the healthcare delivery system. Nurses with a bachelor's degree are more likely to pursue a master's degree, which is a requirement to become a nurse educator. New York State will need nurse educators to prepare the necessary nursing workforce and to accomplish this we must require the educational advancement of RNs.

For future nurses who will be affected by the enactment of this legislation, the accessibility of distance learning programs and the availability of state and federal loan forgiveness and scholarship programs will afford them great flexibility in furthering their education. The majority of healthcare institutions provide tuition reimbursement for their employees and many offer academic classes on-site. Academic institutions with traditional bachelor's degree programs have made accommodations for associate degree and diploma-prepared RNs by establishing articulation agreements and by offering specially designed RN-to-bachelor's bridge programs. Additionally, this legislation allows nurses to obtain a conditional one-year registration if they are not able to complete the bachelor's degree within the designated ten-year period.

New York State is recognized throughout the nation for its high standards in health care and education. NYSNA supports a progressive approach to advancing nursing education, requiring a bachelor's degree within ten years because it acknowledges the benefits of associate and diploma nursing education, while still requiring educational advancement essential to achieving higher quality patient outcomes and in preparing the next generation of nurses. With this in mind, NYSNA supports the enactment of legislation that would expand the education requirement for the profession of nursing.

References:

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