

How VHA Chief Nursing Officers View Their Role and Keys to Their Effectiveness

Confidential VHA Survey Conducted in Conjunction with Witt/Kieffer
Updated February 2006

Executive Summary

In September 2005, Witt/Kieffer surveyed VHA chief nursing officers (CNOs) to understand current compensation and benefits as well as their thoughts on two key issues: 1) the most pressing challenges facing them and 2) their effectiveness in both today's overall health care environment and within their own organization.

A total of 321 CNOs participated in the survey and 165 submitted complete data.

Highlights of the survey are:

- **CNOs view setting a vision for the department as very important but do not see themselves as successful in doing so.** Establishing a vision for the department and supporting the professional practice of nursing were rated as highly important by 86 percent of VHA CNOs. But just over half of the respondents (55 percent) identified themselves as being successful at meeting this goal. Participating in *ongoing mentoring* ranked third in importance (66 percent) in enhancing the professional practice of nursing leadership.
- **Role in finance and organizational profitability rank lowest on CNO self-performance list.** Only 15 percent of CNOs report themselves "*highly successful*" when it came to revenue enhancement, but 63 percent feel they are "*successful*." Similar figures were seen (22 percent and 66 percent) when CNOs rated their role in generating cost savings. Yet, financial and organizational profitability are perceived as leading contributors to CNO turnover.
- **Disagreements with the CEO and financial issues (65 percent) were identified as contributing factors in CNO turnover.** This appears to be a significant factor in CNO turnover and should be studied further. The survey also found that nearly half (49 percent) of respondents are responsible for 40 percent or more of their organization's total budget. Despite this, only 46 percent of respondents rated *lack of perception as a steward of institutional resources* as reducing the CNOs effectiveness. This may suggest a misalignment between what the CEOs and CNOs deem to be important and should be investigated further.
- **CNOs feel less successful at fostering physician nurse relationships.**

Only 29 percent of CNOs report they are highly successful in enhancing physician nurse relationships and 53 percent said they are successful. More than half (57 percent) indicate physician conflict creates CNO turnover.



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- **Seventy-seven percent of CNOs feel** a lack of visibility within their organization diminishes their effectiveness.
- **VHA CNOs do not perceive large numbers of CNOs leaving the profession.** Only 19 percent of CNO respondents indicated that nurse executives are leaving the profession.
- **Conflicting data about job satisfaction.** Eighty-two percent of respondents say they are satisfied or very satisfied with their positions and 90 percent plan to stay in their current position for at least one year. *However, only 52 percent say they feel they have been successful in gaining respect throughout the organization and only 33 percent indicate being successful at enhancing clinical outcomes.* A natural question is why the low score regarding enhancing clinical outcomes given the significance for a nursing division.
- **Work/life balance is a major factor when deciding to leave the profession.** Seventy-two percent of respondents *highly agree or agree* that lack of balance in professional/personal life contributes to *most* CNO turnover. CEO conflicts and financial issues are the second leading factor in CNO turnover (65 percent of respondents) and physician conflicts and nursing staff turnover were almost a statistical tie (57 percent and 54 percent respectively) as the third leading factor in turnover.
- **Nearly two-thirds of VHA CNOs have no identified mentor or a succession plan in place to succeed them.** Sixty-seven percent of current CNOs report their organization has neither identified a successor for their position nor has a succession plan in place to do so. This number is startling considering that 30 percent of respondents indicate they plan to leave their current position in less than six years and 47 percent plan to retire in less than ten years.
- **Better recruitment of and retention of nurses as leading actions to enhance the effectiveness of patient care.** CNOs point to better recruitment and retention of nurses as the number one action to enhance patient care effectiveness. The second action is to improve nurse/patient staffing ratios. Developing strong nurse leaders and improving nurse/physician relationships are also rated highly.
- **“Hands-on” administrative experience and budget planning desirable for future CNOs.** More than 90 percent of current CNOs believe that prior administrative experience and budget planning are crucial for potential CNOs. Strategic planning experience ranks third at 83 percent.
- **More than 80 percent of CNOs are over age 46.** Seventy-nine percent of current VHA CNOs are between the ages of 46 and 60 years old. Ninety-one percent have more than 20 years experience in the nursing profession. The CNO ranks are predominately female (94 percent) and Caucasian (97 percent).