



8515 Georgia Avenue, Suite 400  
Silver Spring, MD 20910-3492

1.800.284.2378  
301.628.5000 *tel*  
301.628.5004 *fax*

[www.nursecredentialing.org](http://www.nursecredentialing.org)

## **The Benefits of Pathway to Excellence® Designation**

*How Implementing the Practice Standards Can Improve Nursing Care, Satisfaction, and Retention*

*Ellen Swartwout, MSN, RN, NEA-BC*

### **What Is Pathway to Excellence®?**

The American Nurses Credentialing Center's (ANCC) Pathway to Excellence® Program is a new organizational credential to recognize healthcare facilities that have created positive work environments where nurses can flourish. Pathway-designated organizations are deemed the best places to work for nurses, with high nurse satisfaction and retention. Research shows that healthy work environments improve not only nurse satisfaction but also patient satisfaction and quality of care.<sup>1, 2, 3, 6, 20</sup>

### **Why Seek Pathway Designation?**

The Pathway to Excellence Program defines and measures the essential elements of an optimal nursing practice environment. Designation confirms to the community that your healthcare organization is committed to nurses, recognizes what is important to nursing practice, and values nurses' contributions in the workplace. Nurses know their efforts are supported. They invite other nurses to join them in this desirable and nurturing environment.

To earn Pathway designation, a healthcare organization must demonstrate that it has integrated 12 practice standards into its operating policies, procedures, and management structure. These standards focus on the workplace, a balanced lifestyle for nurses, and policies that support nurses on the job. Organizations benefit from the application process, in which they collect the data and evidence to support the 12 standards and validate their integration through an online nurse survey.

### **Pathway to Excellence Practice Standards**

The Pathway to Excellence Program's 12 practice standards are based on research and expert input as to what makes a positive work environment for nurses. It is apparent that having a healthy work environment in which these practice standards are in place positively influences the quality and safety of patient care and the satisfaction of both nurse and patient.

#### **1. *Nurses Control the Practice of Nursing***

A practice environment that embraces a shared governance model is at the center of the effort to create a healthy work environment for nurses. RNs who are directly involved in decisions that affect nursing practice and have demonstrated autonomy and responsibility experience higher job satisfaction and contribute to improved quality of care and safety for patients.<sup>3, 10, 11, 15</sup>

#### **2. *The Work Environment Is Safe and Healthy***

A safe and healthy atmosphere for the provision of nursing care is essential to the delivery of quality nursing practice. An environment where safety is paramount for both nurses and patients is evident in Pathway to Excellence-designated organizations. Studies indicate that

## The Benefits of Pathway to Excellence® Designation

### *How Implementing the Practice Standards Can Improve Nursing Care, Satisfaction, and Retention*

---

work environments with a culture of safety demonstrate a reduction in work-related injuries.<sup>16, 25</sup> A supportive work environment that attends to the health and well-being of staff is another important feature present in Pathway to Excellence-designated organizations.

#### 3. *Systems Are in Place to Address Patient Care and Practice Concerns*

A critical issue in health care is effective communication to address practice concerns. It has been noted that silence and poor communication lead to patient safety issues and reduced job satisfaction.<sup>2, 20</sup> Pathway-designated organizations are found to have dispute mechanisms in place to address patient care and practice concerns without retribution. The Joint Commission recognized this issue and in 2009 implemented a standard that addressed conflict-and-dispute resolution in health care.<sup>17</sup> In a study by Siu, Laschinger, and Finegan, it was demonstrated that positive work environments enhance nurses' conflict-management skills, thus influencing unit effectiveness.<sup>22</sup> Having processes in place to address practice concerns influences patient outcomes and the identification of quality-improvement opportunities.

#### 4. *Orientation Prepares New Nurses*

Studies have indicated that a solid orientation to the profession for new graduate nurses has a profound effect on nurse turnover, retention, and satisfaction.<sup>18, 21</sup> An orientation program for all nurses new to the organization is expected to be in place in any Pathway to Excellence-recognized facility. It is evident that a comprehensive orientation can impact a nurse's decision to stay at an organization and can influence the level of quality care delivered.<sup>4</sup>

#### 5. *The Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) Is Qualified and Participates in All Levels of the Facility*

The CNO is the highest nursing authority within a healthcare organization. It is crucial that he or she have the proper qualifications for the role and be "at the executive table" when decisions are made about patient care delivery. The influence of CNO leadership on nursing care and patient care quality is identified as a key element for elevating nursing practice.<sup>8</sup>

#### 6. *Professional Development Is Provided and Utilized*

Professional career growth is of great importance to nurses. Healthcare organizations that offer professional development opportunities to their nurses have higher RN job satisfaction and retention rates.<sup>26</sup> Development opportunities may include career ladders, continuing education, certification, involvement in professional nursing organizations, and receipt of academic degrees. Fostering nurses' professional development results in increased knowledge and quality.<sup>9, 29</sup>

#### 7. *Competitive Wages/Salaries Are in Place*

Compensation has been examined as a factor influencing a nurse's decision about where to work and where to continue working.<sup>14</sup> There is evidence that compensation is routinely examined and evaluated in Pathway to Excellence-designated organizations.

#### 8. *Nurses Are Recognized for Achievements*

Recognition is an important factor in nurse retention and satisfaction. In a study by Tourangeau and Cranley, praise and recognition were found to be key predictors in nurses' intention to continue working in their organization.<sup>24</sup> It lets nurses know their contributions are valued. Nurses' achievements are known in both the internal and external environments. A Pathway to Excellence designation confirms to colleagues and consumers alike that nurses are recognized and valued for their accomplishments.

## The Benefits of Pathway to Excellence® Designation

### How Implementing the Practice Standards Can Improve Nursing Care, Satisfaction, and Retention

---

#### 9. *A Balanced Lifestyle Is Encouraged*

Nurses who work in a supportive environment that encourages a healthy work–life balance are more likely to be satisfied on the job.<sup>19, 28</sup> The lack of a balanced lifestyle may lead to nurse burnout. In a 2006 study by Leiter and Laschinger, it was discovered that a professional practice environment played a key role in predicting nurse burnout.<sup>13</sup> It is important that nurses care for themselves so they can provide optimal care to those in need. Examples of programs that Pathway to Excellence organizations provide to enhance work–life balance may include flexible scheduling, childcare, employee assistance, and wellness programs.

#### 10. *Collaborative Interdisciplinary Relationships Are Valued and Supported*

The literature has demonstrated that a collaborative atmosphere supports a culture of safety that results in better patient outcomes and greater job enjoyment and satisfaction.<sup>3, 12, 15, 27</sup> Healthy work environments demonstrate collaboration among healthcare professionals as a key component for the delivery of safe, quality care, with the added benefit of higher job satisfaction for all disciplines involved.

#### 11. *Nurse Managers Are Competent and Accountable*

Strong nursing leadership has been identified as one of the top reasons nurses stay at an organization. Nurses who trust their leaders and work in an open environment that embraces patient safety are more likely to continue on the job.<sup>3, 5, 23, 27</sup> It is imperative that nurse managers have the knowledge, skills, and experience to effectively perform their roles and that they are accountable for outcomes in their area.

#### 12. *A Quality Program and Evidence-Based Practice Are Used*

Evidence-based practice has been identified as an essential component of improved patient outcomes.<sup>7</sup> A robust quality program, in which clinical decisions are based on solid evidence, can translate into better patient outcomes. Nurses play a key role in quality initiatives for patient care improvements, and they lead many efforts to implement best practices in patient care.

## Pathway to Excellence Testimonials

What are the practical benefits of ANCC's Pathway to Excellence designation? Read these firsthand accounts from Pathway-recognized hospitals to find out:

*At the Menninger Clinic, one of the biggest benefits we've seen is the organizing framework the Pathway standards provide. Shared governance takes time to grow and develop, but without Pathway I am not sure we would have implemented it. Just recently, our Nursing Quality and Practice Council finalized guidelines for how Menninger's RNs will practice as primary nurses. As the CNO, [I find it] thrilling to see this level of involvement and initiative. Our nurses will be more fulfilled in their jobs. Our patients will benefit. This initiative has made such a positive impact, and it is only one of many examples.*

Pam Greene, PhD, RN  
Chief Nursing Officer  
The Menninger Clinic  
Houston, TX

*As the saying goes, "Life is a journey, not a destination." It's all about living in the present and working hard to meet your goals. For the nurses at Baylor Regional Medical Center, our*

## The Benefits of Pathway to Excellence® Designation

### *How Implementing the Practice Standards Can Improve Nursing Care, Satisfaction, and Retention*

---

*Pathway to Excellence experience has helped us focus on the journey as much as the destination (i.e., designation). As our team of staff nurses and nursing leaders worked on each of the Pathway sections, we really bonded as a group pursuing a common goal. We identified areas to improve upon and made sure we celebrated all the areas in which we were already excelling. Our Pathway journey produced a high level of camaraderie that our entire team embraced.*

Eileen Flanagan, MSN, RN  
Baylor Regional Medical Center  
Plano, TX

*North Hills Hospital is a newly designated Pathway to Excellence facility. Our journey to Pathway was exciting and very rewarding. The difference in the strength of our nursing department is palpable. Pride and camaraderie were apparent as we worked on strengthening nurse autonomy and other criteria for designation. Our retention rates improved and staff nurse participation on committees increased significantly as nurses realized the importance of their voice in the hospital's decision-making process. At our celebration ceremony, each nurse received a Pathway to Excellence pin to wear with dignity and honor.*

Jane McCurley, MBA, BSN, RN, FACHE, NEA-BC  
Chief Nursing Officer  
North Hills Hospital  
North Richland Hills, TX

*Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center's Pathway to Excellence designation demonstrates to our staff and to the community that we support our nurses and view their role as central to the patient care delivery process. It shows current and potential team members that we are dedicated to creating a work environment where nurses can flourish in their profession, and that we understand the importance of providing opportunities for professional growth and development, respecting and appreciating one another, and ensuring the satisfaction of our employees, patients, and physicians. By meeting the standards of this designation, we have seen a decrease in vacant nursing positions and an increase in nursing satisfaction.*

Virginia Earley, MSN, RN, CMSRN  
Professional Practice and Innovation  
Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center  
Houston, TX

### **Learn More**

Visit [www.nursecredentialing.org](http://www.nursecredentialing.org) for more information about ANCC's Pathway to Excellence Program. You'll find valuable resources, such as the Pathway to Excellence self-assessment tool, to determine if your organization is ready to begin the application process. Questions? E-mail the Pathway to Excellence Program Office at [pathway@ana.org](mailto:pathway@ana.org) for answers.

Watch for upcoming articles about the Pathway to Excellence Program. Next time: *Getting Started: Organizational Assessment and Gap Analysis.*

### About the American Nurses Credentialing Center

The American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC), a subsidiary of the American Nurses Association (ANA), provides individuals and organizations throughout the nursing profession with the resources they need to achieve practice excellence. ANCC's internationally renowned credentialing programs certify nurses in specialty practice areas; recognize healthcare organizations for promoting safe, positive work environments through the Magnet Recognition Program® and the Pathway to Excellence® Program; and accredit providers of continuing nursing education. In addition, ANCC's Institute for Credentialing Innovation® provides leading-edge information and education services and products to support its core credentialing programs.

### References

1. Aiken, L. H., Clarke, S. P., Sloan, D. M., Lake, E. T., & Cheney, T. (2008). Effects of hospital care environment on patient mortality and nurse outcomes. *American Journal of Nursing*, 38(5), 223–229.
2. American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN). AACN standards for establishing and sustaining healthy work environments: A journey to excellence. *American Journal of Critical Care*, 14(3), 187–198.
3. Armstrong, K., Laschinger, H., & Wong, C. (2009). Workplace empowerment and Magnet hospital characteristics as predictors of patient safety climate. *Journal of Nursing Care Quality*, 24(1), 55–62.
4. Cavanaugh, D. A., & Huse, A. L. (2004). Surviving the nursing shortage: Developing a nursing orientation program to prepare and retain intensive care unit nurses. *Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, 35(6), 251–256.
5. Cohen, J., Stuenkel, D., & Nguyen, Q. (2009). Providing a healthy work environment for nurses: The influence on retention. *Journal of Nursing Care Quality*, 24(4), 308–15.
6. Hughes, L. C., Chang, Y., & Mark, B. A. (2009). Quality and strength of patient safety climate on medical-surgical units. *Health Care Management Review*, 34(1), 19–28.
7. Institute of Medicine. (2001). *Crossing the quality chasm: A new health system for the 21st century*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
8. Jones, C. B., Havens, D. S., & Thompson, P. A. (2008). Chief nursing officer retention and turnover: A crisis brewing? Results of a national survey. *Journal of Healthcare Management*, 53(2), 89–106.
9. Kendall-Gallagher, D. K., & Blegen, M. A. (2009). Competence and certification of registered nurses and safety of patients in intensive care units. *American Journal of Critical Care*, 18(2), 106–116.

10. Kim, H., Capezuti, E., Boltz, M., & Fairchild, S. (2009). The nursing practice environment and nurse-perceived quality of geriatric care in hospitals. *Western Journal of Nursing Research* (Online First).
11. Laschinger, H. K. (2008). Effect of empowerment on professional practice environments, work satisfaction, and patient care quality: Further testing the nursing worklife model. *Journal of Nursing Care Quality*, 23(4), 322–330.
12. Laschinger, H. K., & Leiter, M. P. (2006). The impact of nursing work environments on patient safety outcomes: The mediating role of burnout and engagement. *Journal of Nursing Administration*, 36(5), 259–267.
13. Leiter, M. P. & Laschinger, H. K. (2006). Relationships of work and practice environment to professional burnout: Testing a causal model. *Nursing Research*, 55(2), 137–146.
14. Lum, L., Kervin, J., Clark, K., Reid, F., & Sirola, W. (1998). Explaining nursing turnover intent: Job satisfaction, pay satisfaction, or organizational commitment? *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 19, 305–320.
15. Manojlovich, M., & Laschinger, H. K. (2007). The nursing worklife model: Extending and refining a new theory. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 15(3), 256–263.
16. Mark, B. A., Hughes, L. C., Belyea, M., Chang, Y., Hofmann, D., Jones, C. A., & Bacon, C. T. (2007). Does safety climate moderate the influence of staffing adequacy and work conditions on nurse injuries? *Journal of Safety Research*, 38(4), 431–446.
17. Nadzam, D. (2009). Nurses' role in communication and patient safety. *Journal of Nursing Care Quality*, 24(3), 184–188.
18. Newhouse, R. P., Hoffman, J. J., Suflita, J., & Hairston D. P. (2007). Evaluating an innovative program to improve new nurse graduate socialization into the acute healthcare setting. *Nursing Administration Quarterly*, 31(1), 50–60.
19. Penz, K., Stewart, N. J., D'Arcy, C., & Morgan, D. (2008). Predictors of job satisfaction for rural acute care registered nurses in Canada. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 30(7), 785–800.
20. Pinkerton, S. (2005). AACN standards for establishing and sustaining healthy work environments. *Nursing Economics*, 23(3), 138–140.
21. Scott, E. S., Engelke, M. K., & Swanson, M. (2008). New graduate nurse transitioning: Necessary or nice? *Applied Nursing Research*, 21, 75–83.
22. Siu, H., Laschinger, H. K., & Finegan, J. (2008). Nursing professional practice environments: Setting the stage for constructive conflict resolution and work effectiveness. *Journal of Nursing Administration*, 38(5), 250–257.

23. Taunton, R. L., Boyle, D. K., Woods, C. Q., Hansen, H. E., & Bott, M. J. (1997). Manager leadership and retention of hospital staff nurses. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 19(2), 205–226.
24. Tourangeau, A. E., & Cranley, L. A. (2006). Nurse intention to remain employed: Understanding and strengthening determinants. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 55(4), 497–509.
25. Vaughn, T. E., McCoy, K. D., Beekman, S. E., Woolson, R. E., Torner, J. C., & Doebbeling, B. N. (2004). Factors promoting consistent adherence to safe needle precautions among hospital workers. *Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology*, 25(7), 548–555.
26. Vollers, D., Hill, E., Roberts, C., Dambaugh, L., & Brenner, Z. (2009). AACN's healthy work environment standards and empowering nurse advancement system. *Critical Care Nurse*, 29(6), 20–27.
27. Wade, G. H., Osgood, B., Avino, K., Bucher, G., Bucher, L., Foraker, T., French, D., & Sirkowski, C. (2008). Influence of organizational characteristics and caring attributes of managers on nurses' job enjoyment. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 64(4), 344–353.
28. Wilkins, K., & Shields, M. (2009). Employer-provided support services and job dissatisfaction in Canadian registered nurses. *Nursing Research*, 58(4), 255–263.
29. Zulkowski, K., Ayello, E. A., & Wexler, S. (2007). Certification and education: Do they affect pressure ulcer knowledge in nursing? *Advances in Skin and Wound Care*, 20(1), 34–38.