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Hospital Uses Perks to Retain Nurses

By Nancy Deutsch, RN, contributor

The shortage of nurses is doing something good for the profession: making nurses more appreciated, more coveted, and certainly more valuable.

If you've any doubt, consider what some hospitals are now offering nurses who sign on to work at their institution: hefty sign-on bonuses, higher pay, assistance with continuing education, concierge services, and even, in some unusual cases, a new car.

At Riverside Community Hospital in Riverside, California, new nurses with at least one year of experience who commit to working full-time for three years are offered sign-on bonuses of a Dream House/Dream Car. If they choose to relocate to a home in the hospital's neighborhood, the hospital pays \$12,000 of the closing costs on their new home. For nurses who don't need or want that bonus, they can opt for \$10,000 in car payments instead.

"Some people will buy a Mercedes!" notes Tiffany Guthrie, human resources assistant for the hospital. "Those are two things people need. We hope they'll stay in the area."

If the nurse doesn't want the money towards a new home or car, he or she takes home a sign-on bonus ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000, Guthrie said. New graduate nurses are also welcome, and receive a sign-on bonus of \$2,000.

The Dream House/ Dream Car deal has already paid off for the hospital, Guthrie says. New legislation in 2004 mandated that there be fewer patients per nurse, for a ratio of six patients per nurse. This meant more nurses were direly needed. When the bonus was first offered, the goal was to have 100 new full-time nurses on staff by the end of the year, she says. They signed on 100 nurses half-way through the year.

The advertising about the Dream Job/Dream House/ Dream Car deal has brought many people in, Guthrie says. "It's become a brand for us. Other hospitals have mimicked it."

The hospital works at keeping nurses on staff feel valued, Guthrie says. The hospital offers Best-Upon-Request concierge services. "They're here to run employee errands," Guthrie says. The concierge will run numerous errands for staff at no extra cost to the employee. Errands run from simply picking up dry cleaning, to planning weddings, Guthrie says.

Concierge services certainly seem to be an attractive option being offered by more and more institutions.

In Littleton, Colorado, Littleton Adventist Hospital has offered concierge services to all health care employees, and patients, since October. Human Resources director Joe Condon says he had worked at another institution in the area offering concierge services, so he knew how it worked and how it could help “balance demands of work and personal lives.”

Patients don't use the service much, since most are in the hospital for short periods of time, but the staff like the convenience, he said. The most popular errand seems to be car servicing, such as having the oil changed or the car cleaned, and dry cleaning services are also frequently requested.

A hospital of Littleton Adventist Hospital's size—roughly 1,000 employees—translates to 200 to 300 requests for concierge services each month, according to Todd Wheeler, CEO of Hospital Concierge of America. Depending on the number of employees a hospital has, the cost to the hospital ranges from \$150,000 to \$500,000 a year, he said. He added that his service “allows hospital to demonstrate that they care.”

Condon doesn't think the cost is unreasonable. “In terms of what we get, I don't think it's a big expense at all,” he said.

Employees pay nothing for the service, above and beyond the fee for the product or service itself, such as the cost of dry cleaning or stamps or the gift they requested be purchased, Wheeler says. He adds that he is a stickler on no-tipping because “you can't do that and make this a true benefit.”

Ann Carrier, RN, a nurse in labor and delivery at Littleton Adventist Hospital for two years, says she has used the concierge service to have her car's oil changed, order out lunch, and even to buy a week's supply of groceries. “It's definitely a benefit worth promoting,” she said.

Were she to change jobs, Carrier says she would now look for a hospital that offers something similar.

“Our retention rates are better,” Condon says, although he can't say that the concierge service is what has caused the change. The hospital has made some other changes to make nurses happier, he says, such as providing nurses with a set amount they can spend on continuing education that allows them some leeway in selecting how they want to pursue that education, and offering more training to supervisors so they know how to show the nursing staff they are appreciated.”

Anything and Everything seems like the theme at Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield, Illinois. For one thing, “we're the leading payer in the Chicago-area market,” said Marsha Markham, Human Resources Planning and Staffing Specialist. The higher wages and other perks have allowed them to recruit 77 nurses in three months, Markham said.

The hospital also offers a staff incentive plan called STEP (Striving Together for Excellent Performance) that lets every employee in good standing receive up to 6 percent of their annual salary in a bonus payment. The hospital decides on goals for a fiscal year and if patients are satisfied with the service and the hospital stays under budget, employees receive the bonus, says Myriam Miller, a nurse on medical oncology for almost four years. Two years ago, the bonus was equivalent to an extra pay check, she says.

"I think the perk I've benefited most from is related to education."

For two years in a row, Miller has gone to Boston for a four-day conference on oncology, at Central DuPage Hospital's expense. "That was really cool," Miller says. "It's a great opportunity to learn so much."

Employees who need health care themselves and are cared for at Central DuPage or one of its care centers will have their expenses picked up 100 percent, Markham adds. There are numerous other perks the hospital offers its nursing staff, she says, because "the hospital does very well. We pay staff top dollar to have cream of the crop nurses. We have longevity here."

Of course, the hospital also offers concierge services.

With all the perks these hospitals are offering, and the success they seem to enjoy, it may foretell the wave of the future. But not every nurse will be lured with the promise of having her dry cleaning picked up or a higher salary.

While "the benefits are great," Miller admits to not staying for any of them. "I really look for—and have found—a lot of camaraderie on my unit." When Miller was looking for a new job four years ago, she chose Central DuPage because a friend told her that the people were wonderful, and friendly.

"That's what caught my interest," she said.

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