



Bridging the Gap: Supporting Nurses Amid Staff Shortages

Healthcare is facing an unprecedented staffing crisis. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI, 2023), vacancy rates for registered nurses and licensed practical nurses remain among the highest across all health professions, and thousands of additional nurses will be needed by 2030 to meet rising demand¹. Simultaneously, a Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU, 2022) survey found that nearly one in three nurses is considering leaving the profession due to stress, burnout, and unsafe working conditions.² This double threat is pushing hospitals and long-term care facilities to operate with fewer hands on-deck. As organizations search for scalable solutions, technology, particularly modern nurse call systems—has emerged as a powerful tool to support workflow and reduce pressure on understaffed teams.

How Hospitals Are Responding to the Staffing Crisis

To combat the effects of ongoing shortages, healthcare systems are adopting strategies that blend workforce planning, innovation, and technology. These include:

Flexible Staffing Models: Provincial health systems are increasingly using float pools, cross-training, part-time or casual staff to cover gaps and minimize over-reliance on agency nurses.

Virtual Nursing: Remote nurses support bedside teams by handling documentation, discharge instructions, admissions, and patient education through video and audio technology.

Improved Workflows: Lean designs and interprofessional care models are being used to reduce waste and ensure every team member works at the top of their license.

Retention and Wellness Programs: Investments in mental health support, mentorship and professional development are being made to strengthen retention.

A Canadian Nurses Association (CNA, 2023) report emphasizes the importance of combining workforce reconfiguration with technology investments to maintain safe care delivery amid shortages.³ Nurse call systems play a foundational role by improving coordination, triaging requests, streamlining workflow, and increasing efficiency at the point of care.

One of the most time-consuming aspects of a nurse's shift is managing and responding to interruptions. Studies in Canada and internationally show that nurses can be interrupted as frequently as once every six to eight minutes⁴ contributing to delays, errors and burnout.

In-Room Technology and Workflow Efficiency

Earlier generations of "traditional" nurse call systems served as a single function: alerting staff for patient assistance. While still essential, today's advanced nurse call systems have evolved into intelligent communication and workflow platforms

With features like real-time staff locating, automated task routing, escalation protocols, and EMR integration, nurse call systems now play a key role in optimizing care delivery and workflow coordination.

Advanced (smart) nurse call systems alleviate part of this burden by enabling faster, more informed responses. When a patient call is received, the system can display the nature of the request, location, and their acuity level. Some platforms integrate with real-time location systems (RTLS), allowing staff to see who is closest and available to respond while automatically clearing outstanding patient requests when staff are present.



This not only reduces response time, but also ensures the right resource is deployed—enhancing patient satisfaction and reducing unnecessary workload for nurses.

These smart systems act as digital “care traffic controllers” that help prioritize requests and route them to appropriate mobile personnel based on role, location, and availability. For example, if a patient requests a blanket, the system can remotely notify a nursing assistant or support staff instead of interrupting a nurse engaged in a medication administration. This targeted approach, used by some hospitals, ensures that clinical resources are used most efficiently.

Another way nurse call improves workflow is through task automation and documentation support. Automated reminders for rounding, pain assessment, and hourly checks can be built into the system, helping ensure compliance with care protocols even during short-staffed shifts. Certain systems can also integrate with the electronic medical record (EMR), allowing staff to document completed tasks with a single tap or voice command. By minimizing manual documentation and non-clinical tasks, nurse call systems free up more time for direct patient care—a vital benefit when each clinician is responsible for more patients than usual. Touchscreen digital whiteboards can also integrate to inform patients and families with questions, by providing real up-to-date information, instead of requiring the patient to call the nurse to the room.

Nurse call also collects valuable data that can inform staffing models and workflow improvements. By analyzing response times, call volumes by shift, and types of requests, nurse managers can identify bottlenecks and allocate resources more effectively. For example, if calls spike during shift changes or meal times, support staff can be scheduled strategically to cover high-demand periods.

Satisfaction scores rise when nurse call technology enhances the care experience for both patients and staff. When patients needs are met, satisfaction scores rise. For staff, knowing the non-clinical requests can be offloaded, escalations handled automatically, and tasks documented more easily reduces stress. In short, modern nurse call helps restore a sense of control and teamwork in environments when both are in short supply.

Conclusion

As the staffing crisis continues to challenge Canada's healthcare system, hospitals must proactively develop strategies that ease the workload on clinical staff and support long-term workforce sustainability.

Whether using existing communications or deploying advanced solutions like Jeron's Provider Nurse Call through PX Solutions, technology can help balance workloads, reduce inefficiencies, and ensure safe, timely patient care. While essential operational tools cannot replace the human touch, they can extend and amplify the reach of limited staff, making every shift more manageable and every patient interaction more meaningful.

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Adapted for Canadian readers; core content and insights remain the author's original work.

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