

COVID-19: Nurse Staffing FAQs

December 2020

Nurse Staffing Ratios

How can hospitals care for additional patients and still meet nurse-staffing ratio regulations?

A: The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) is now offering an expedited option for hospitals to flex the nurse staffing ratios. This process, which took effect immediately with the Dec. 11 release of [All Facilities Letter 20-26.4](#), means hospitals can use certain alternative measures as soon as they submit the waiver request form.

These alternative measures — for hospitals with patient surges or staffing shortages — mean that the state will allow nurses to care for one additional patient in the ICU and in step-down units, and two additional patients in telemetry, ED, and med/surg units. As a result, this will flex nurse-to-patient ratios as follows:

- ICU — from 1:2 to 1:3
- Step-down units — from 1:3 to 1:4
- ED and telemetry — from 1:4 to 1:6
- Med/surg — from 1:5 to 1:7

Hospitals that meet these criteria will be presumptively approved. CDPH will have 10 working days to ask the hospital any questions, largely for line of sight into surge activity, and these waivers will be in place for 60 days from the date of the request.

This expedited process is an important addition to the current waiver process, in which hospitals individually submit ratio waivers for review and approval by CDPH surveyors. In many cases, this current waiver process has resulted in significant delays as hospitals wait for approval and does not provide the certainty hospitals need.

Hospitals that need additional relief beyond the ratios or units of the hospital outlined in the expedited process can continue to submit waiver requests through the current process. CDPH will consider these on a case-by-case basis.

For both the expedited and current processes, a hospital seeking a waiver must submit [CDPH Form 5000A](#) and supporting documentation to the CDPH Center for Health Care Quality Duty Officer at CHCQDutyOfficer@cdph.ca.gov and copy the local [CDPH District Office](#).

Program Flex for Documentation

How can hospitals request a program flex to implement surge standards of nursing documentation?

A: Many hospitals have asked how they can request a program flex for nursing documentation. To do this, the hospital must complete [CDPH Form 5000A](#) and submit it to CHCQdutyofficer@cdph.ca.gov and copy [the local CDPH District Office](#). CHA has developed [instructions and sample language](#) to help hospitals complete the form. Note that if a hospital needs CDPH to approve the request within eight hours, it should put the word

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“URGENT” in the email subject line. CHA is also advocating with CDPH to allow such a flex statewide; in the absence of that, hospitals may wish to request individual program flexes now.

Team Nursing

Given the significant shortage of critical care nurses, can hospitals deploy a team nursing model to help care for patients?

A: Many acute care hospitals will need to turn to a team nursing approach during this unprecedented surge. Team nursing includes a specialized or experienced registered nurse (RN) leading a team of patient extenders (e.g., RNs, licensed vocational nurses, and certified nursing assistants) to maximize the number of patients who can be cared for in the ICU and other affected units or areas. Two health facilities have shared their team nursing model: [Riverside University Health System](#) and [Kaiser Permanente, Southern Region](#). CHA has requested a new, expedited process for nurse staffing ratio waivers by adding a provision for the most common structures of team nursing. As more information about that request becomes available, we will share it with hospitals.

Nursing Students

Are hospitals allowed to use nursing students to supplement our staff during the public health emergency?

A: The Board of Registered Nursing (BRN), under Business and Professions Code Section 2727(d,) is allowing nursing students to practice in much-needed areas to help with nursing care. In an Aug. 11 [news release](#), the BRN describes the process for deploying nursing students for patient care needs and/or for vaccine administration purposes based on their skills competency. This [Emergency Care Matrix](#) is a tool health care facilities can use to ensure students and recent graduates are assigned to provide care safely and within their competency levels.

COVID-19 ICU Training

What resources are available to assist nurses in understanding the specific care COVID-19 ICU patients need?

A: The Emergency Medical Services Authority has collaborated with Elsevier to produce an [online critical care educational series](#) to assist RNs in learning more about caring for COVID-19 ICU patients. The course provides up to 18 continuing education credits and includes preceptor skills work sheets. It can be used in conjunction with other ICU training experiences.