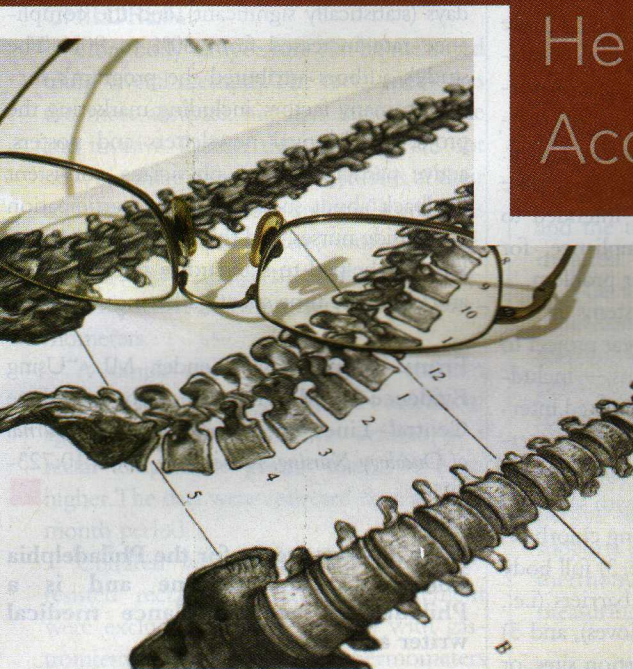


STATE ORGANIZATIONS

Help PA and NJ Nurses
Accrue Required Credit Hours



Pennsylvania and New Jersey last year joined the ranks of states that require continuing education (CE) for nurses seeking to maintain their licensure status. That raises the total to 30 states, including Delaware, that have adopted a CE mandate.

As with the other states, New Jersey and Pennsylvania now require that RNs and LPNs obtain a minimum of 30 accredited contact hours of CE for each two-year licensing renewal period.

As the increasing number of adoptive states indicates, the CE mandate reflects a national trend. "There has been a perceptible movement toward increasing the amount of education nurses receive," says Patti Gates Smith, MSN, RNC, consultant for Professional Development with the Pennsylvania State Nurses Association (PA Nurses), an organization that actively advocated for the CE mandate.

As Smith suggests, the mandate doesn't represent a substantial change of direction. Many nurses have long embraced CE as a means to advance their careers and, more significantly, their profession. "They recognize the need to keep current on the issues and research related to patient care," she

says. "PA Nurses, along with other organizations, was very keen on getting this law passed, and many of our members met with legislators to express our support."

The New Jersey State Nurses Association (NJSNA) also has championed CE as a means to ensure professional competency. "The new law will only advance the practice of

nursing in the state," comments Carolyn Torre RN, MA, APN and director of practice for NJSNA. "We always supported this mandate because we believe continuing education is imperative."

SETTING THE SPECIFICS

While both states are on board with the CE requirements, the situation is still evolving in Pennsylvania. The law was signed into effect on June 29, 2006, but the Pennsylvania State Board of Nursing was, at press time, still developing specific rules and regulations for approved nursing education under the law.

"Right now, we're in a holding pattern," indicates Smith. "We won't know what's acceptable under the law until the regulations are published by the Board. This is the biggest area that is up in the air right now. The implementation date for this law cannot be determined until the regulations are complete," she explains.

In the meantime, Pennsylvania nursing professionals can look to New Jersey, where the law has not only been passed, but specific rules and regulations have been spelled out. In this way, they can get a strong hint of what's in store.

The New Jersey regulations (posted in

their entirety at www.njsna.org/associations/6274/files/NursingContinEdRegs.pdf) outline the ways state nurses can accumulate the required CE hours. According to the regulations, RNs and LPNs can obtain hours by successfully completing:

- CE courses or programs approved by a credentialing agency accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies;
- a course given by a school, college or university accredited by the New Jersey Department of Education or an agency of another state with similar requirements; or
- a course in a doctoral degree program that has a research component.

New Jersey nurses also can acquire hours by teaching and developing a curriculum for a new and approved CE program related to nursing, or a new course in a school, college or university accredited by the New Jersey Department of Education (or an agency of another state with similar requirements). In both cases, "new" means that the RN or LPN has never taught or developed curricula for that course or program in any educational setting.

CE hours also can be obtained when nurses author a published textbook or textbook chapter related to nursing, or a peer-reviewed, published article in a medical, nursing or health-related journal. In addition, nurses can gain hours by:

- presenting a new, hour-long seminar or lecture to professional peers;
 - completing a doctoral dissertation or research project;
 - developing new instructional materials such as a CD-ROM or videotape; or
 - acting as a preceptor for at least 100 hours as part of an organized preceptorship program.
- For nurses in both states, all CE activities

Continuing Education

must be approved by a credentialing agency recognized by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies.

STATEWIDE REACTIONS

In both states, passage of the laws didn't generate a great deal of surprise. Rather, many nurses had a "been there-done that" reaction and were supportive of the CE mandate. "In general, there hasn't been great concern among New Jersey nurses, because they've already been doing this without the mandate," reveals Torre.

Smith says her Pennsylvania colleagues "realize that continuing education raises the level of care they provide. They understand they'll only reinforce and build on what they've learned in the past."

However, any kind of mandate induces a sense of urgency. "Some nurses are in a panic, as they're now trying to figure out how they can fit the education in with their other commitments, like work and family," says Smith.

Betsy Snook, M.Ed., BSN, RN and PA Nurses' executive administrator, notes, "While nurses weren't too surprised, a mandate places education higher on their 'to do' lists. And let's face it, nurses are very busy people."

Smith says that's why PA Nurses is striving to provide ways to help. "PA Nurses is adopting a multi-pronged approach, trying to get as many education programs out there as possible."

In fact, both New Jersey and Pennsylvania nursing organizations are endeavoring to make it as easy as possible for nurses to get the CE credits. For instance, in Pennsylvania, nurses can get credit hours by attending the PA Nurses annual summit.

Also, in its quarterly magazine, *Pennsylvania Nurse*, PA Nurses will provide education modules. Explains Snook: "An issue may have

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an article about a medical condition, such as congestive heart failure, that includes a test. Nurses can do the test, send it in with the fee and, if they complete it satisfactorily, they'll receive a certificate."

ONLINE HELP

One of the vehicles that both states employ to make it easier is online education, which eliminates many logistical problems associated with CE. Online education costs less than conference attendance, which involves registration fees, travel expenses and time away from work. "Online education is so much more accessible," says Torre.

That's why it provides an excellent venue for professional development, says Carol Patton, DrPH, RN, APRN, BC CRNP, director of nursing programs at Chatham College in Pennsylvania. "One of the main issues in Pennsylvania, with the state's nursing shortage, is that it's hard for nurses to get away from their jobs and travel to get the education."

Chatham College, along with other medical education institutions in the state, will provide help to nurses by developing even more online courses. "We're currently talking with healthcare partners, to determine what nurses specifically need, because we want our efforts to best reflect current needs and to bridge the practice-education gap. We're also talking with the nurses themselves, asking them to tell us what they need."

Both the NJSNA (www.njsna.org) and PA

Nurses (www.panurses.org) offer affordable online continuing education opportunities at their Web sites. Moreover, both organizations provide helpful information about how nurses can meet the new CE requirements.


Pennsylvania nurses also can obtain updates and information about the evolving rules and regulations at the state's Web site (www.dos.state.pa.us/bpoa/nurbd/mainpage.htm) or at the Hospital & Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania Web site (www.haponline.org).

Nurses also can find help and information at their own hospitals and extended-care facilities, reports Snook. "Many healthcare organizations — whether they're small community hospitals or large educational institutions — have staff development departments."

Says Torre of NJSNA: "Nurses shouldn't worry. There will be many ways for them to meet the mandates."

POSITIVE IMPACT

Meanwhile, the general consensus is that the new CE mandates will have only a positive impact, both for the nurses and patients. Smith of PA Nurses notes, "Regardless of the delivery format, ongoing education can only increase a nurse's knowledge base. As a result, nurses will be able to provide a higher quality of patient care."

Snook agrees, adding: "Continuing education ensures that patients receive safe care provided by extremely competent practitioners." 

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