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Nursing survey flags care quality, safety, AI concerns

Nurses see understaffing as biggest obstacle to providing quality care

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Nurses and guests sit at a State House advocacy day hosted by the American Nurses Association Mass. on Sept. 30, 2025.

Ella Adams / SHNS

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, May 7, 2026.....Massachusetts nurses continue to lament the quality of care they're able to deliver in hospitals amid persistent understaffing, with the workforce also plagued by violent attacks from patients, according to survey results released Thursday.

Some 71% of nurses say the quality of care has worsened in the past two years, the Massachusetts Nurses Association survey found. That's a slight improvement from the 78% figure reported in last year's survey, but the union noted it's 33 percentage points higher than pre-COVID levels.

Released during National Nurses Week, the survey draw from the responses of 485 active registered nurses.

"On behalf of patients and healthcare workers across Massachusetts, nurses are sounding the alarm about our deteriorating healthcare system," said MNA President Katie Murphy, who's also a practicing ICU nurse. "Nurses are experiencing rampant understaffing, resource constraints, and growing patient complexity, straining our ability to provide safe, high-quality care. These systemic problems demand urgent solutions."

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The image shows the cover of a survey report. On the left, there is a photograph of a lighthouse on a rocky coastline with waves crashing against the shore. The right side of the cover is a dark blue background with white and light blue text. At the top right, the logo for BEACON RESEARCH is displayed, with 'BEACON' in large white letters and 'RESEARCH' in smaller blue letters below it. Below the logo, the title 'A Survey of Massachusetts Registered Nurses' is written in large white font. Underneath the title, the date 'April 2026' is shown in a smaller white font. At the bottom right, there is a white rectangular box containing the MNA logo (MNA with a small SM superscript) and the text 'Massachusetts Nurses Association'. At the very bottom of the cover, in small white text, it says 'Prepared by Beacon Research • 6 Beacon Street, Suite 510 • Boston, MA 02108 • 617.939.0125 • www.BeaconResearch.com'.

About 60% of respondents identified understaffing as the biggest obstacle to providing quality care. The majority of nurses say they don't have enough time to give their patients needed care and attention.

That dynamic escalates patient safety risks, with 52% of nurses saying they're aware of medical errors linked to "excessive patient loads" and one in four nurses believing understaffing has contributed to patient deaths. A state agency is working on a pilot to boost patient safety and improve detection of avoidable medical mishaps at hospitals, which has the potential to save hundreds of millions of dollars in excess health care spending.

Murphy said nurses are being "stretched too thin to safely meet patient needs." MNA-backed legislation (S 1522 / H 2448) requiring the Department of Public Health to limit patient-to-nurse ratios was sent to study.

About 16% of nurses plan to leave the field within two years, and 18% intend to exit within three to five years, the survey found. Retirement was the most common reason, followed by burnout or exhaustion and poor working conditions.

One in four nurses do not feel safe at their jobs. Nearly 70% of nurses also reported at least one episode of violence or abuse over the past two years, and that burden is disproportionately felt among hospital nurses.

MNA members were on Beacon Hill this week to promote violence prevention legislation (H 4767 / S 1718) that would create new criminal penalties for people who assault health care workers. The bill cleared the House in November and appears on the radar of leaders of the Senate Ways and Means Committee.

The survey also captured the growing role of artificial intelligence in the nursing field. Some 38% of nurses reported using AI in their facilities, compared to 18% in last year's survey. The most common uses were for documentation and note-taking.

Eight in 10 nurses said they have not received AI training. Almost half of nurses are not comfortable using AI, and 81% are worried about being held liable for AI-generated advice that harms patients.

"When asked to describe their concerns in their own words, nurses most frequently cited errors, inaccuracy, or wrong information (21%), a 9-point increase from last year," the survey memo said. "Uncertainty about AI's uses and a need for more information (10%), data privacy and security (8%), and over-reliance on technology at the expense of critical thinking (8%) were also commonly raised."

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