



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

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Fact Sheet

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VA Nursing Service: Excellence in Patient-Centered Care

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has one of the largest nursing staffs of any health care system in the world. Numbering more than 61,000 nationwide, the VA nursing team – composed of registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, vocational nurses and nursing assistants – provides comprehensive, complex, and compassionate care to the nation's veterans, helping them not only to prevent, maintain, or regain health, but also to learn to live with their disabilities and eventually to die with dignity.

VA Nursing also provides the largest system of clinical training and cooperative education opportunities in association with undergraduate and graduate programs at numerous colleges and universities. In the 1990s, VA provided clinical experience to one out of every four professional nursing students in the country. VA nurses are highly valued members and leaders of the health-care team, contributing their knowledge and expertise to the care of patients

A Short History

In 1921, shortly after the end of World War I, Congress established the U.S. Veterans Bureau. A year later, Public Health Service hospitals were assigned to the Veterans Bureau, transferring 1,400 nurses. The Veterans Administration was established in 1930 to consolidate and coordinate government activities affecting war veterans. Approximately 2,500 registered nurses were employed in VA Nursing Service. During World War II and the Korean War, the military demand for nurses caused a shortage at VA hospitals. Throughout history, VA nurses have continued to answer the call to serve their country and maintain status as reservists. Today, many VA nurses are currently deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan with their reserve units.

In the 1950s, VA expanded its affiliations with nursing schools to produce steady growth in the number of nurses receiving clinical experience in VA medical centers and, thus, aiding recruitment. In the following decade, advancements in medicine required specialized training programs creating the need for advanced practice nurses (e.g. nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists) in such areas as coronary care. Education and research became integral components of VA Nursing Service.

During the Vietnam era, the VA medical system was faced with patient needs that were different from those of previous wars. Nurses were required to care for disabilities on a larger scale due to the increased efficiency with which wounded veterans were evacuated from the battlefield and treated. As a consequence of the Iraq War, VA

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nurses are once again seeing new types of poly-trauma injuries and helping veterans face these new challenges with specialized expertise, creativity, and compassion. Geriatric and long-term care became specialized needs for veterans of earlier conflicts. In the 1970s, Nurse Practitioners were appointed as primary providers of patient care and the use of Clinical Nurse Specialists was expanded. VA nurses met the new challenges and continue to respond with competent caring approaches to constant changes in health care.

Components of VA Nursing

Professional nursing supports the mission of the VA health care system by providing state-of-the-art, cost-effective nursing care to patients and families as they respond to health and illness. VA Nursing Service integrates a wide array of services, encompassing patient care, clinical practice, education, research and administration. In addition to medical, surgical and psychiatric units, VA nurses work in intensive care, spinal cord injury, geriatric, dialysis, blind rehabilitation, specialty care (e.g. diabetes clinics), hospice, domiciliary, oncology, and organ transplant units. VA nurses provide a continuum of care across primary, ambulatory, acute, geriatrics and extended care settings. They work in outpatient clinics, nursing home units and home based primary care programs. VA nurses proudly serve America's heroes by practicing the art and science of nursing in order to provide holistic, evidence-based, high quality care.

VA Registered Nurses (RN) serve in four career paths: clinical, advanced practice, supervisory/administrative, and consultative. Examples of advanced practice roles include Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNS), Nurse Practitioners (NP), and Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNA). Nurses in these roles are generally referred to as advanced practice nurses (APN). Consultative roles have evolved in areas such as infection control, informatics, community health research and education (e.g. nurse executives, nurse investigators, and nursing program faculty). VA nurses function as administrators to provide advanced leadership in resource allocation and evaluation. VA nurse researchers receive both VA and non-VA funding to conduct research to address nursing care issues for veterans. VA nursing partnerships with academic affiliates contribute to research and education, creating significant advancements in patient care. VA nursing education uses current technology to furnish distance learning programs to VA nurses nationwide. During national emergencies, VA nurses are part of the interdisciplinary team, providing health care, backup to military hospitals, or coordination assistance to local, regional and national emergency management agencies.

Professional Categories

VA had 66,902 nursing personnel (including nurse anesthetists) as of March 2008:

➤ Registered Nurses (RN)	38,041
➤ Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNA)	494
➤ Nurse Practitioners (NP) ⁺	4,317
➤ Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNS) ⁺	672
➤ Licensed Practical/Vocational Nurses (LPN/LVN)	10,894
➤ Nursing Assistants (NA)	12,484

⁺These categories are included in the RN Total

Source: VA PAID data, Human Resources Data Mart (HRDM) (<http://vssc.med.va.gov/>), extracted 03/08.

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RNs have graduated from a school of professional nursing approved by a state accrediting agency and have passed a state-approved written examination. They are leaders or members of health-care teams maintaining the goal of providing high quality care, enabling patients to optimize their own health or die with dignity.

APNs are registered nurses who have at least a master's degree in nursing or a related field and national certification in clinical advance practice. APNs meeting those criteria may gain the credentials to be licensed independent practitioners who do not require supervision or countersignature of their orders by a physician. Clinical Nurse Specialists, Nurse Practitioners, and Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists are APNs.

Although APNs primarily are direct care givers, their activities also may include education, research, consultation and administration. APNs may function autonomously within a defined scope of practice or in collaboration with other health-care providers. They try to minimize illness and disability and promote optimal health. Nurse Practitioners function as independent health-care providers in primary and specialty care settings. Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists administer a significant portion of the anesthetics given to patients each year.

Licensed practical or licensed vocational nurses (LPNs or LVNs) have graduated from a school of practical or vocational nursing approved by the state accrediting agency or the National League for Nursing and have passed a state-approved written examination. LPNs/LVNs provide a full range of services for patients with a variety of physical or behavioral problems, including personal care, diagnostic support duties, medication administration, treatments and procedures, under the supervision of an RN. LPNs perform expanded clinical leadership roles in some long term care and specialty programs. Their professional contributions are pivotal to the health care delivery team.

Nursing assistants have graduated from a technical program or school and passed a state-approved certification exam or received equivalent training in VA. Under an RN's supervision, NAs serve a vital role in supporting other nursing staff by providing patient care that includes personal care and technical procedures related to nursing.

The personal contact and professional care provided by each level of the nursing provider is pivotal to each veteran's health experience in VHA. VA Nursing Service is dedicated to promoting optimal health, patient safety, quality health care, and the highest professional standards, in order to ensure that our veterans receive the best possible care and that our staff works in the best possible health care system.

<http://vaww1.va.gov/nursing/>

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