

Workplace Violence in Health Care is a National Crisis

Workplace violence against health care workers, including emergency nurses, is a national crisis. Bureau of Labor Statistics data from 2023 reveals that although health care workers are just 10 percent of the national workforce, they account for 48 percent of missed workdays due to assault.

Across the country, nurses and other health care workers are far too often being punched, kicked, spat on, or, in extreme cases, stabbed or shot. Some even die from their injuries. Many suffer physical and emotional trauma that drives them away from the critical work of emergency nursing.

In late 2024, ENA surveyed close to 1,000 nurses who had worked in the ED in the previous two weeks. Twenty percent had been physically assaulted. More than half reported verbal abuse or threats of violence.

According to the CDC, the number of

health care workers reporting
harrassment
while at work more than
doubled between
2018-2022.



Source: Menendez, C.C., et al. (2024, May 29). Prioritizing our healthcare workers: The importance of addressing the intersection of workplace violence and mental health and wellbeing. CDC NIOSH Science Blog. https://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2024/05/29/hcw_violence_mh/

Emergency Departments (EDs) Experience Violence at High Rates

Assaults directed at workers occur at especially high rates in EDs, which are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Moreover, EDs are required under the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act to stabilize and treat the emergency medical conditions of all patients. Health care professionals in the ED interact with members of the public when emotions are running high and behavior can sometimes become violent.

One recent study noted that workers in large urban EDs experienced workplace violence at least once every four shifts. In an ENA study, of the nearly 200 emergency nurses who reported being physically assaulted, 29 percent had been kicked or kneed, 25 percent had been shoved and 20 percent had an object hurled at them.

Additional data indicates as many as one-in-six nurses leave the profession annually because of workplace violence. Given the shortage of nurses plaguing the nation, retaining these professionals should be everyone's priority.

The Save Healthcare Workers Act Will Make Assaults Directed at Hospital Workers a Federal Offense

With the increase in violence against hospital workers, it is clear they need to be better protected.

Although some states have passed laws to increase penalties for violence against health care workers, there is currently no federal law that protects hospital employees from assault or intimidation. As a result, many violent attacks on health care workers are never prosecuted.

The Save Healthcare Workers Act (H.R. 3178/S. 1600) would mirror protections for airline and airport workers. This legislation would allow federal authorities to charge those who assault hospital personnel with a federal crime with a prison term of up to 10 years. Aggravating factors, such as the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or the infliction of bodily injury, would further increase the maximum term of imprisonment.

By creating stronger penalties, this legislation would deter and prevent violence against hospital employees. Additionally, under the bill, a defendant whose action is a direct manifestation of a physical or mental disability can raise this disability as an affirmative defense to prosecution.

The Save Healthcare Workers Act has Broad Support Among Health Care Providers and Hospital Groups

The Save Healthcare Workers Act is supported by broad coalition of health care organizations including the Emergency Nurses Association, American Hospital Association, American College of Emergency Physicians, America's Essential Hospitals, American Medical Group Association, American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, American Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons, Children's Hospital Association, American Nurses Association, Common Spirit Health, Vizient, West Virginia Hospital Association and Florida Hospital Association.

House Request: Cosponsor and Support the Save Healthcare Workers Act (H.R. 3178).

This bill was introduced by Rep. Madeleine Dean (D-Penn.) and was referred to the House Judiciary Committee for further action.

Senate Request: Cosponsor and Support the Save Healthcare Workers Act (S. 1600).

This bill was introduced by Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.) and was referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee for further action.