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Strengthening the Nursing Profession in South Florida

A robust healthcare system is essential to ensure healthy lives and promote wellness within a community. That all begins with the nursing profession, the foundation of any health system.

“The healthcare sector is a major economic driver in our region. If we want to continue building South Florida as a top-tier healthcare destination for the physical, mental, and economic wellbeing of South Floridians, we need the strongest and most diverse nursing workforce. Many studies have shown that great outcomes and great patient satisfaction require great nursing,” says Ralph Egües, executive director of the Nursing Consortium of South Florida (NCSF).

✖ As a 501(c)(3) organization, the NCSF was founded in 1997, and traces its roots back to nursing's response to the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew five years earlier. That crisis provided many of the area's nurse leaders from competing hospitals and nursing schools a compelling reason to come together in a meaningful way. "That community response, that initial positive experience, was the first step in a unique journey for South Florida nursing that continues to bear fruit today," according to Egües.

"Many organizations are created with a drive to grow revenue, but the Consortium really comes from a different place," says NCSF president and Memorial Regional Hospital chief nursing officer Maggie Hansen. "It comes from a place of service, community and collegiality and concern for the profession. The Consortium uniquely brings together nurse leaders in practice and academia with the purpose of strengthening the nursing profession in our region so that it is able to meet the needs of a very culturally diverse community at a very high level."

More than 60 hospitals and other providers of nursing services, nursing schools, nurse staffing agencies, hospice service providers, and others are dues-paying member organizations of the organization. The Consortium's growing membership currently stretches from Tavernier in the middle Keys to Jupiter in north Palm Beach county; including three of the state's largest urban population centers and the rural communities of Glades county.

Since its founding the NCSF has viewed uniting nursing practice and education as key to achieving its principal mission of identifying and addressing opportunities to strengthen nursing in South Florida. Today the NCSF works to address the region's need for culturally and technically competent nurses, by cultivating interest in nursing careers among middle and high school students, by creating greater public awareness of the importance of great nursing to the quality region's healthcare sector (South Florida's third largest economic driver), and by supporting increased funding for nursing education and for the implementation of strategic

interventions and research aimed at establishing best practices in the recruitment, development, and retention of a quality nursing workforce well suited to South Florida's rich diversity.

"The Consortium offers inexpensive and very high quality continuing education opportunities for nurses and students that are also great opportunities for building peer networks. We encourage nurses at all levels to increase their knowledge and skills, and we stress that continuing their education is important to their professional growth," adds NCSF treasurer and Palm Beach Atlantic University nursing school dean Joanne Masella. "Yet many aspiring nurses don't realize that only graduates of [AACN-CCNE](#) or [ACEN](#) accredited nursing school programs qualify to continue their education at accredited schools to pursue advanced studies, including RN-to-BSN and master's programs."

The NCSF encourages all schools of nursing in the region to become fully accredited. Only nursing schools accredited by the [AACN-CCNE](#) or [ACEN](#) (formerly NLNAC) in addition to the school's accreditation by a regional or national accrediting body are eligible for membership in the NCSF.

"For nearly two decades, the Nursing Consortium of South Florida has been leading the charge in strengthening the foundation of South Florida's nursing community," explains Debbie Tedder, NCSF president-elect and Jackson Memorial Hospital chief nursing officer. "Each member organization brings its unique perspectives and leverages their core competencies and resources on the Consortium initiatives of greatest interest to them. All have found that a Consortium membership provides a unique forum for purposeful networking, and the result has been the fostering of a greater degree of understanding, trust, and collegiality than is typical in other markets. The growing nursing shortage and the urgent need to build our nurse leadership ranks as our most senior nurse leaders retire are challenges that can best be addressed by leaders in academic and healthcare settings working together."

NCSF members receive regular e-newsletters on topics of interest and there are numerous programs offered throughout the year by and for the membership and others that help further the NCSF's agenda. There are ample opportunities for members to become involved with programs and projects including its Centralized Clinical Placement System for scheduling student nurse clinical experiences, the Day in the Life of a Nurse™ program for middle and high school students, the Sea-E-You™ leadership development cruise series, and two day-long educational conferences held each year in the winter and fall. Annual dues are \$1,200.00 per organization. All employees of member organizations are able to register for NCSF educational opportunities at reduced rates.

"In the Consortium, senior nurse leaders from both academic and practice settings find a unique community of peers with which to reflect and develop joint responses to the factors having a negative impact on the regional nurse workforce," says Melissa Durbin, NCSF secretary and Boca Raton Regional Hospital chief nursing officer. "One of our areas of focus is elevating nursing leadership, whether in a clinical setting or in academia, and building the competence and confidence of all nurses to be leaders. The Consortium allows the leaders, really any employee, of member organizations the opportunity to expand and leverage their talents and knowledge, and to favorably impact the nursing profession in our region. The sharing between nursing professionals in academia and those in the clinical setting works to empower nursing at each organization and helps us collectively better address some of the challenges nurses face every day and the factors keeping the profession as a whole from making an even greater contribution in all settings."

"Looking ahead, the Consortium plans to address the current and projected nursing shortage. It will also focus on developing better nursing leaders through expanded and continually enhanced educational offerings," notes Hansen.

The Consortium will also focus on enhancing the transition from nursing school to practice as a new grad, with a goal of facilitating greater competency sooner and increasing new hire

retention. Hansen says that they also realize that in every setting, nurses are caring for sicker patients with the same amount or fewer resources than they had in years past. At the same time they are faced with having to comply with governmental regulations that require focus on tasks that nurses don't necessarily feel are beneficial to the patient.

"We need to build processes to assist our nurses in complying with these regulations with minimal distraction from their core functions," she says. "Nurses in Florida are still struggling to practice at the top of their license. We need to work together to remove these barriers. We need to develop and implement solutions in a collaborative interdisciplinary manner. It is also true that as patient care becomes more high-tech, the nurse needs to work harder to maintain the balance of the art and science of nursing."

NCSF committee service is available to any employee of a Nursing Consortium of South Florida member organization, not just to the CNOs and Deans, and not just to those elected to the Board of Directors.

"Committees typically meet by conference call," says Egües. "Committee service is a great way to develop leadership skills, build a stronger peer network, and make a positive contribution to your profession."

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