

Creation and Implementation of the "Nurses Caring for Nurses" Initiative by the Wisconsin Nurses Association (WNA)

Sara Bell, DNP, MS, RN, NE-BC, Kristin Waite-Labott, BSN, RN, CARN, CPRC, Christopher Wojnar, MSN, APNP, PMHNP-BC

Introduction

Nursing, a profession rooted in compassion and resilience, inherently demands significant emotional and physical fortitude. Nurses consistently encounter high-stress environments, complex ethical dilemmas, and traumatic situations, often compounded by extended shifts and intricate patient needs. These pervasive stressors profoundly affect nurse well-being and, consequently, the quality of patient care delivered. The increasing prevalence of chronic stress, burnout, and mental health crises among nurses compelled the Wisconsin Nurses Association (WNA) to establish the Nurses Caring for Nurses (NCN) initiative. Its initial deliverable was a web-based resource hub designed to support nurse well-being through evidence-informed strategies and peer support. This white paper outlines the initiative's development, implementation, and early outcomes, detailing the comprehensive resources it provides.

Background

Nurses navigate a unique array of occupational stressors, including heavy patient loads, prolonged shifts, emotionally charged encounters, and the escalating complexity of healthcare systems. Historically, these demands have contributed to disproportionately high rates of burnout, mental health disorders, and suicide among nurses compared to the general population (Choflet et al., 2023; Davidson et al., 2021). The National Academy of Medicine recognized this severity, declaring burnout a "crisis level" issue in the U.S. health workforce, with 35-54% of nurses reporting symptoms (Murthy, 2022). A significant barrier perpetuating this crisis is the professional and organizational stigma that frequently deters nurses from seeking crucial mental health support (Riedel et al., 2021). In response, the American Nurses Association (ANA) advocates for employers to cultivate environments that prioritize well-being, normalize open mental health discussions, and actively promote help-seeking behaviors (ANA, 2024).

Recent research consistently highlights these critical concerns:

- **Burnout Syndrome:** Characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy, nurse burnout directly correlates with diminished patient safety, increased errors, and decreased patient satisfaction (Li et al., 2024).
- **Mental Health Impacts:** The COVID-19 pandemic severely intensified these challenges, leading to a sharp increase in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD) among nurses, largely due to intense workloads, grief, and social isolation (Riedel et al., 2021). This distress often contributes to elevated substance use and, tragically, nurse suicide, underscoring the urgent need for robust, peer-informed mental health support (Davidson et al., 2021).

- **Quality of Life (QoL):** Burnout profoundly erodes nurses' overall QoL, impacting their health, personal relationships, and professional performance. A 2022 review confirmed that as burnout severity increased, all aspects of QoL declined (Khatatbeh et al., 2022).

Recognizing these profound challenges, WNA explicitly prioritized nurse well-being within its 2023–2025 Strategic Plan, identifying the NCN initiative as fundamental to both professional sustainability and high-quality healthcare delivery (Wisconsin Nurses Association, 2024).

Problem Statement

Nurses are uniquely vulnerable to occupational stress, a reality long documented in the literature, stemming from factors like prolonged hours, compassion fatigue, and continuous exposure to suffering (Li et al., 2024; Riedel et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically intensified these issues, driving unprecedented levels of burnout, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress within the nursing population (Riedel et al., 2021). Despite the clear impact of these significant personal and professional challenges on nurse well-being, safety, and job performance, nurses frequently lack access to centralized, nurse-specific resources that address their holistic health, particularly emotional and mental resilience.

Fragmentation of Support Resources

Although numerous mental health, wellness, and professional assistance resources exist, their scattered nature across various platforms, institutions, and geographic regions creates significant barriers to access:

- **Lack of Awareness:** Many nurses remain unaware of the diverse services and tools available through national, state, or workplace programs.
- **Time Constraints:** Demanding schedules and irregular shift work severely limit nurses' ability to search multiple platforms for support that meets their needs.
- **Stigma and Confidentiality Concerns:** Nurses often hesitate to seek help within employer-based systems due to fears of judgment or professional repercussions (Riedel et al., 2021). Without a trusted, confidential starting point, many forgo seeking help entirely.
- **Overwhelm and Accessibility:** Even when resources are technically available, the sheer volume of disconnected offerings - ranging from substance use programs to peer support groups - can feel overwhelming and hard to navigate.

Consequently, a critical void persists in the professional landscape: a centralized, accessible, and confidential hub specifically tailored to support nurses' comprehensive physical and emotional needs.

Identifying the Need

WNA identified this critical gap through extensive qualitative feedback from nurses across Wisconsin, many of whom voiced frustration at not knowing where to turn during moments of personal or professional crisis. Others noted that institutional supports were often reactive rather than proactive, and not always psychologically safe or inclusive.

Crucially, insights from nurses with direct lived experience of mental health challenges, substance use issues, trauma, burnout, and suicidal ideation profoundly guided the platform's development. Their input ensured the creation of a psychologically safe, de-stigmatized entry point for others navigating similar struggles, emphasizing confidentiality, psychological safety, and proactive support.

The imperative for a single, consolidated platform offering curated, credible, and confidential resources for a wide range of wellness concerns became evident. WNA recognized that consolidating these supports could significantly reduce access barriers, combat stigma, and empower nurses to proactively manage their well-being. This understanding culminated in the design and implementation of the NCN landing page - an intuitive online portal providing emotional health support, crisis intervention tools, professional development content, and direct links to peer and institutional resources, all in one accessible location.

Development of the "Nurses Caring for Nurses" Initiative

The Wisconsin Nurses Association (WNA) initially launched the Nurses Caring for Nurses (NCN) initiative prior to 2020 and made a critical decision to rejuvenate it in direct response to the escalating mental health and well-being crisis among nurses - a crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, pervasive workforce shortages, moral distress, and burnout.

Key Milestones & Context:

- **Pre-2020**
 - Originally launched as WNA's Peer Assistance Program to support nurses experiencing symptoms of a substance use condition.
 - Weekly calls provided with the specialty nursing associations to offer peer support related to COVID.
 - Webinars were conducted to share lived experience(s).
- **2022: Post-COVID Re-Launch and Initial Grant Funding**
 - The Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) named their professional alternative-to-discipline program, the "Professional Assistance Program", prompting WNA to change the name to "Nurses Caring for Nurses".
 - The initiative commenced with a grant from the American Nurses Foundation (ANF), part of a national effort to fund innovative, state-level nurse mental health programs.

- WNA developed the program to provide nurse-to-nurse peer support, focusing on emotional well-being, stress reduction, and fostering connection.
- The model was designed for accessibility and confidentiality, grounded in lived experience, offering supportive listening and understanding rather than clinical therapy.
- **2023: Growth and Structure**
 - WNA implemented training for numerous peer supporters across the state, emphasizing evidence-based approaches like psychological first aid, active listening, and trauma-informed care.
 - Partnerships were forged with healthcare organizations and academic institutions to broaden program visibility and utilization.
 - Peer support was delivered through both one-on-one sessions and virtual drop-in spaces, with outreach specifically targeting stigma reduction, encouragement of help-seeking, and community building.
- **2024: Rejuvenation, Expansion Efforts, and Policy Advocacy**
 - In collaboration with the Wisconsin Peer Alliance for Nurses (WisPAN), the need to rejuvenate and strategically expand the Nurses Caring for Nurses work was identified, leading to the formation of a dedicated NCN Task Force under the Workforce Advocacy strategic umbrella.
 - WNA began exploring policy and structural supports to evolve the program into a comprehensive well-being framework.
 - Efforts intensified to integrate the program into academic settings, increase its reach to rural nurses, and address systemic barriers to mental health access.
 - Advocacy initiatives around confidentiality protections, psychological safety, and fitness-for-duty standards commenced, directly aligning with the NCN mission.
 - Collaborations deepened with the Wisconsin Medical Society and state health leadership toward creating a comprehensive Professional Health Program for nurses.
- **2025 and Beyond: Strategic Planning and Sustainability**
 - Strategic planning for the period beyond 2025 has commenced, with a core emphasis on:
 - Establishing a sustainable funding model for the NCN initiative.
 - Expanding the program's reach into nursing schools and residency programs.
 - Creating diverse educational modules, webinars, a foundational white paper (now complete), and continuing education (CE) opportunities.
 - Fostering robust research collaborations to inform and validate the program's impact.
 - Solidifying the initiative's position as the premier peer support and mental health advocacy platform for Wisconsin nurses.

The WNA developed the "Nurses Caring for Nurses" initiative in direct response to critical feedback from Wisconsin's nursing community and in alignment with national best practices.

The detailed development process involved:

- **Needs Assessment:** WNA systematically gathered qualitative and quantitative data through comprehensive surveys and dedicated listening sessions. Nurses consistently articulated a clear demand for confidential, peer-informed support accessible outside traditional employer-based systems (Wisconsin Nurses Association, n.d.-a).
- **Lived Experience Leadership:** From its inception, the initiative has been profoundly shaped by nurses who possess direct lived experience with the very challenges the platform aims to address. Their invaluable input ensured that the site not only provides relevant resources but does so in a manner that is perceived as safe, genuinely helpful, and empowering. These individuals provided critical insights into the complexities of stigma, the nuances of help-seeking behavior, and what truly resonates with frontline nurses enduring personal and professional hardship. Their leadership is pivotal in fostering a cultural shift within nursing, moving from silent suffering toward a paradigm of collective support.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** WNA established robust partnerships with key organizations including the Wisconsin Peer Alliance for Nurses (WisPAN), Empowered Psychiatric Solutions, and a diverse group of nursing professionals representing various backgrounds and organizations. This collaborative framework was essential to ensuring that all content is practical, relevant, and authentically peer-informed. This inclusive approach is fundamental to meeting the diverse needs of the entire nursing community.
- **Framework Design:** The foundational site framework was innovatively designed leveraging generative artificial intelligence (AI) to comprehensively explore and map key aspects of emotional and physical well-being pertinent to the nursing profession.
- **Content Curation:** The website was meticulously populated with carefully selected tools and external links specifically chosen to support emotional well-being, facilitate crisis response, enable ongoing professional education, and contribute to institutional wellness initiatives. The broad spectrum of resources ensures that nurses across all roles and practice settings can derive benefit from the platform.
- **Ongoing Updates:** A dedicated and dynamic feedback mechanism is integrated into the site, allowing for continuous, user-driven expansion and refinement of resources. This feature empowers the nursing community to actively contribute to the ongoing evaluation and enhancement of available support, ensuring the site remains a dynamic and up-to-date hub for Wisconsin nurses.

Resource Hub Framework

The Nurses Caring for Nurses website

(<https://www.wisconsinnurses.org/nurses-caring-for-nurses>) is meticulously designed as a comprehensive, one-stop support system for nurses. Its content is strategically organized into several essential, intuitively categorized sections:

1. **Crisis Support:** Immediate assistance is paramount. This section includes direct links to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and WisPAN, which provides confidential,

nurse-to-nurse peer support specifically designed to offer empathetic connection and de-stigmatized assistance.

2. **Emotional Well-being:** Recognizing the significant emotional strain inherent in patient care, this category offers vital mental health support. Resources include access to counseling services, peer support groups, and practical strategies for managing stress, such as mindfulness training, all aimed at helping nurses maintain mental resilience.
3. **Organizational Support:** Healthcare institutions bear a crucial responsibility in fostering nurse well-being. This section provides tools and guidance for institutions to cultivate a supportive culture, implement fair treatment policies, and ensure that internal resources are readily available to promote the health and safety of their nursing staff.
4. **Physical Health:** Acknowledging the physical demands of nursing, this category offers resources to support nurses' physical stamina. This includes guidance on ensuring sufficient breaks, promoting ergonomic work environments, facilitating access to nutritious food, and providing resources for exercise and proper rest.
5. **Personal/Professional Harmony:** This section focuses on strategies to help nurses achieve a healthy balance between their demanding professional lives and their personal lives outside of work. Resources encourage flexibility with scheduling, emphasize the importance of paid time off, advocate for manageable workloads, and promote taking vacations and engaging in self-care for proper rest and recovery.
6. **Professional Growth and Recognition:** Feeling valued and respected is fundamental to job satisfaction. This category highlights opportunities for career advancement, professional development, and recognition of hard work, all of which positively impact nurses' well-being and sense of professional purpose.
7. **Work Environment and Safety:** Ensuring safe and supportive work settings is paramount to preventing injuries, reducing stress, and protecting nurses from all forms of workplace violence. This section includes information on advocating for adequate staffing, access to proper equipment, and implementing effective infection control measures.
8. **Tools and Resources:** This comprehensive category provides a wealth of supplementary materials, including recommended books and articles on wellness, substance use recovery, and resilience, offering deeper insights and personal context. External links direct users to reputable professional organizations and peer support networks, providing access to additional peer communities, substance use recovery resources, and workplace advocacy groups. Interactive webinars offer professional development opportunities focused on self-care and workplace wellness. Downloadable toolkits equip nurses with practical skills like cognitive reframing, radical acceptance, and boundary setting. Crucially, a dedicated section designed for healthcare institutions provides guidance on creating safe and inclusive work environments, promoting fairness, and preventing organizational burnout. As stated earlier, the site features a dynamic feedback form that empowers nurses to recommend additional resources or suggest improvements, ensuring the content remains genuinely community-driven and adaptable.

Outcomes and Impact

Though still in its early stages, the Nurses Caring for Nurses initiative has demonstrated promising initial outcomes, reflecting its potential to significantly impact nurse well-being in Wisconsin:

- **Resource Utilization:** Early data indicates increased utilization of peer support and mental health services since the initiative's launch (Wisconsin Nurses Association, n.d.-b). **From February of 2025 to May of 2025, 591 individuals viewed the Nurses Caring for Nurses website, with an average of 171 views per month.** This demonstrates the successful bridging of the "Fragmentation of Support Resources" identified in the problem statement.
- **Visibility and Awareness:** Information on this initiative has been actively shared at nursing conferences and presentations across Wisconsin, effectively raising awareness. This began with its initial impactful presentation at the WNA's Nurses Day at the Capitol, ensuring broad exposure to the nursing community.
- **Cultural Shift:** The initiative is actively contributing to a vital cultural shift within the nursing profession, normalizing conversations about mental health. This critical effort is aimed at dismantling the pervasive stigma that historically prevents nurses from seeking the support they desperately need.
- **Ongoing Development:** User feedback is not merely collected but is actively shaping the platform's evolution, with concrete plans for future phases including the expansion of toolkits and educational content.
- **Knowledge Dissemination:** The WNA and members of this initiative are actively collaborating to develop a webinar specifically highlighting the creation and availability of this vital resource. This webinar is planned for widespread distribution to WNA members and all nurses across the state.
- **Replicable Model:** The WNA and members of this initiative are collaborating to finalize this white paper, detailing the program's development and early successes. The goal is broad publication, intended to inspire and provide a replicable framework for other states to establish similar vital resources for their nursing professionals.

Conclusion

The Nurses Caring for Nurses initiative represents a timely and profoundly impactful intervention, directly addressing one of the most pressing issues in contemporary healthcare: the mental and emotional well-being of nursing professionals. Through its responsive, resource-rich, and strategically designed platform, WNA is making significant strides toward fostering a healthier, more resilient nursing workforce across Wisconsin. This model offers a highly replicable framework for nursing associations nationwide.

More than just a website, the Nurses Caring for Nurses initiative is a strategic intervention engineered to actively reduce burnout, enhance resilience, and drive systemic change in how the nursing profession supports its members. By providing centralized access to confidential,

curated, and authentically nurse-informed resources, the Wisconsin Nurses Association is setting a compelling example for other state and national nursing organizations. Continued rigorous evaluation and dynamic community feedback will be paramount to ensuring the initiative remains relevant, impactful, and responsive as the nursing profession inevitably continues to evolve. Crucially, by ensuring nurses with lived experience remain central to this work - not merely as participants, but as guiding leaders - WNA is actively modeling a future in which professional support is deeply informed by empathy, authenticity, and profound peer-driven change.

References

- American Nurses Association. (2024, June). *2024 ANA Membership Assembly passes recommendations to address critical issues in nursing practice*. <https://www.nursingworld.org/news/news-releases/2024/2024-ana-membership-assembly-passes-recommendations-to-address-critical-issues-in-nursing-practice/>
- Choflet, A., Rivero, C., Barnes, A., Waite-Labott, K., Lee, K. C., & Davidson, J. E. (2023). Accessibility and financial barriers in the utilization of alternative to discipline programs in the United States. *OJIN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, 28(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3912/ojin.vol28no01man06>
- Davidson, J. E., Ye, G., Parra, M. C., Choflet, A., Lee, K., Barnes, A., & Harkavy-Friedman, J. (2021). Job-related problems prior to nurse suicide, 2003–2017: A mixed methods analysis using natural language processing and thematic coding. *Journal of Nursing Regulation*, 12(1), 28–39. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2155-8256\(21\)00017-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2155-8256(21)00017-X)
- Khatatbeh, H., Al-Dwaikat, T., Al-Sheyab, N., & Khasawneh, A. (2022). Nurses' burnout and quality of life: A systematic review and critical analysis of measures used. *Nursing Open*, 9(2), 1250–1264. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nop2.936>
- Li, L. Z., Yang, P., Singer, S. J., Pfeffer, J., Mathur, M. B., & Shanafelt, T. (2024). Nurse burnout and patient safety, satisfaction, and quality of care: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Network Open*, 7(11), e2443059. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.43059>
- Murthy, V. H. (2022, May). *Addressing health worker burnout: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on building a thriving health workforce*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/health-worker-wellbeing-advisory.pdf>
- Riedel, B., Horen, S. R., Reynolds, A., & Hamidian Jahromi, A. (2021). Mental health disorders in nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications and coping strategies. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 9, 707358. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.707358>
- Wisconsin Nurses Association. (2024). *WNA strategic plan: Goals 2023–2025*. <https://www.wisconsinnurses.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Strategic-Plan-goals-.pdf>

Wisconsin Nurses Association. (n.d.-a). *About WNA*.
<https://www.wisconsinnurses.org/about-wna/>

Wisconsin Nurses Association. (n.d.-b). *Nurses Caring for Nurses*.
<https://www.wisconsinnurses.org/nurses-caring-for-nurses/>