



Forcing nurses to work unlimited hours: A public safety issue that Michigan must address

Forcing registered nurses to work overtime should be the exception, not the rule.

Unfortunately, forced (mandatory) overtime has become standard practice in many Michigan hospitals. Patients are at risk when RNs must continue working despite being fatigued or sleep-deprived. Lack of sleep causes mistakes, impaired motor skills, slowed reaction time and reduced cognitive function.

No one should be cared for by a nurse who is so exhausted that he or she has trouble calculating medication doses, inserting an IV, or responding quickly to a cardiac arrest. Everyone deserves to be taken care of by a registered nurse who is working to his or her full ability.

The problem in Michigan:

- There is no law limiting the number of hours nurses can be forced to work (consecutive or cumulative).
- Many hospital RNs already work 12-hour-shifts, so forcing them to stay longer can push them into a shift of 16, 18 or even 24 hours straight.
- There is no law requiring a rest period between shifts; e.g., a nurse who has worked 16 hours straight can be forced to come back and work another 12- to 16-hour shift after only a few hours off (and therefore little to no sleep).
- For most nurses, their only options when ordered to work unscheduled overtime are to (1) quit, (2), be disciplined, fired, or threatened with loss of their license or (3) work the hours despite being exhausted or sleep-deprived, knowing it could put their patients and themselves at risk.

Laws protect the public by putting reasonable limits on the working hours of truck drivers, pilots, locomotive operators and air-traffic controllers. Hospital nurses, too, are responsible for human lives, and therefore reasonable working limits for them are appropriate and necessary.

Proposed solution for Michigan:

Enacting a Michigan law that better prevents and manages violence against nurses will protect patients, improve healthcare outcomes, and help recruit and retain a strong nurse workforce. Nurses support legislation to do the following (bill numbers for 2019-2020 are pending):

- Limit the hours a registered nurse can generally be forced to work to 12 in a row. RNs could still volunteer for overtime if it is needed. Nurses should be allowed to use their professional and clinical judgment to assess whether they can work extra hours safely.
- Require that hospital nurses get 8 consecutive hours off after a 12-hour shift, so they can get some rest before their next shift.

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- Protect a nurse who refuses forced overtime from being fired, disciplined, retaliated against or losing her professional license due to “patient abandonment.”
- Suspend the 12-hour limit if there is an emergent situation (an “all-hands-on-deck” situation) or if a patient procedure is in process that requires the RN to stay.

Please note: **most RNs do not want to work beyond their scheduled hours.** This is not about overtime pay – it’s about ensuring that nurses are able to fulfill their professional responsibilities to provide safe, quality care and not get burned out and leave the profession.

At least 18 states have laws that protect nurses from working excessive hours. They are:

- Alaska
- California
- Connecticut
- Illinois
- Maine
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- Minnesota
- Missouri
- New Hampshire
- New Jersey
- New York
- Oregon
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island
- Texas
- Washington
- West Virginia

