Washington State Registered Nurses
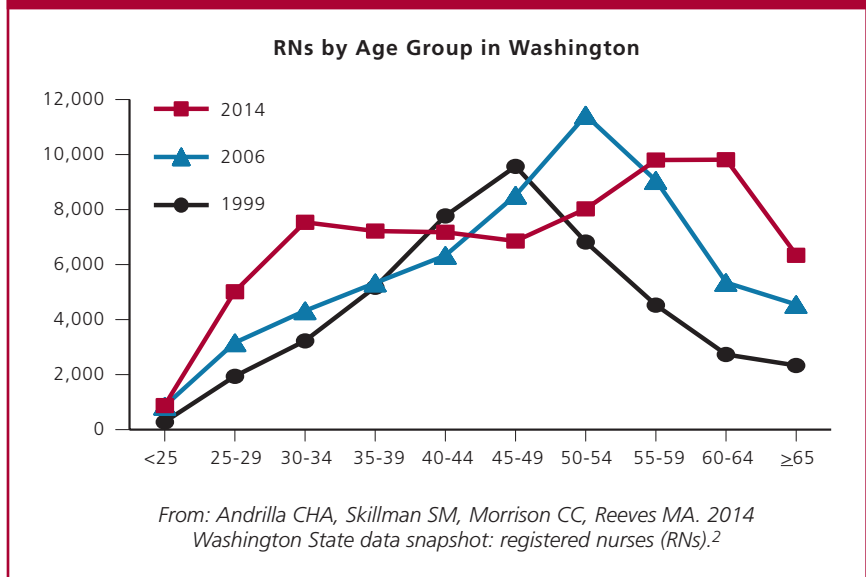## Analysis of RNs Who Did Not Renew Their Licenses: 2008-2014

KEY FINDINGS

- RN licenses expiring annually in Washington State increased in both actual numbers and in the percentage of the total RN supply from 2008 to 2014.
- By age group, the greatest increase from 2008-2014 in the percentage whose licenses expired occurred among the oldest RNs (ages 60-75).
- From 2008 to 2014 the age distributions of RNs whose licenses expired changed: the percentages of expirations declined among RNs age 35-54 and increased among those age 60-75.
- Similar patterns of RN license expirations were found across Washington from 2008 to 2014.
- Higher percentages of RN licenses expired in rural areas than in urban areas of Washington in 2011 and 2014.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Knowing how many and the characteristics of registered nurses (RNs) who leave the state's healthcare workforce each year is useful for estimating future nurse supply trends. The age distribution of RNs in Washington has been changing. In 1999 the mean RN age was 46 years, increasing to 49 by 2011.[1] Because Washington's RN schools graduated more RNs in recent years, by 2014 the average RN age had begun to decline (to 48 years) and the distribution of RN age groups began to show a bi-modal rather than a single-peak distribution, with peaks at about ages 30-34 as well as across ages 55-64 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. RNs by age group in Washington

RNs by Age Group in Washington

From: Andrilla CHA, Skillman SM, Morrison CC, Reeves MA. 2014 Washington State data snapshot: registered nurses (RNs).[2]

As the age composition of the RN workforce has been changing, questions have arisen about who among Washington's RNs are leaving the state (and possibly the workforce). To inform discussion of the best retention strategies, the goal of this report was to answer these questions:

- *How many RNs with Washington State professional licenses allowed their licenses to expire in recent years?*
- *What were the ages and geographic distribution of the RNs who did not renew their licenses, and have these changed over time?*
- *Has the percentage of RNs who did not renew their licenses changed over time?*

Data for these analyses were obtained from the Washington State Department of Health, Health Professions Licensing Data System. Extracts of the complete Washington RN license database were obtained in September 2008, March 2011, and April 2014. Expired licenses (licenses that RNs failed to renew) were identified for the 12-month period immediately prior to these data extraction dates. Analyses were limited to RNs with addresses in Washington.

RESULTS

1. **From 2008 to 2014, RN licenses expiring annually in Washington State increased in both actual numbers and in the percentage of total RN supply** (Figure 2). In the 12 months immediately prior to September 2008, there were 817 expirations (1.3% of all licenses); in 2011 there were 2,392 expirations (3.5% of all licenses); and in 2014 there were 3,871 expirations (5.3% of all licenses).

2. **By age group, the greatest increase from 2008-2014 in the percentage whose licenses expired occurred among the oldest RNs (ages 60-75).** While the percentage whose licenses expired in a year increased in all age groups from 2008 to 2014, among RNs age 70-74 years the percentage of licenses expiring increased from 4% to 27%, and from 3% to 15% among those age 65-69 years (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Number and percent of all RN licenses expiring annually in Washington State in 2008, 2011 and 2014
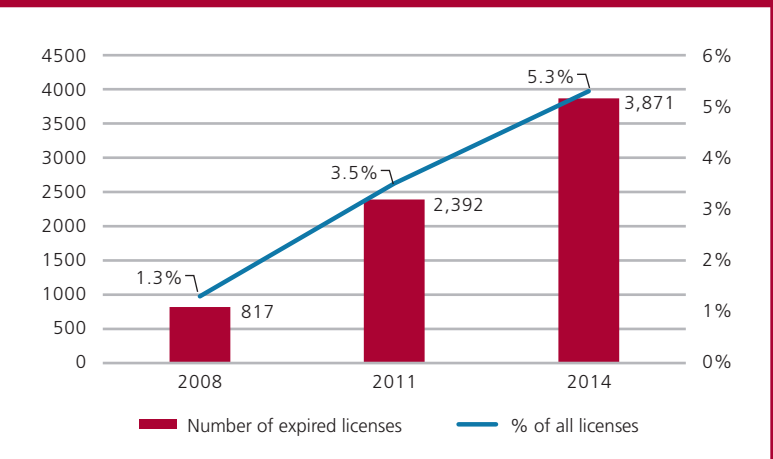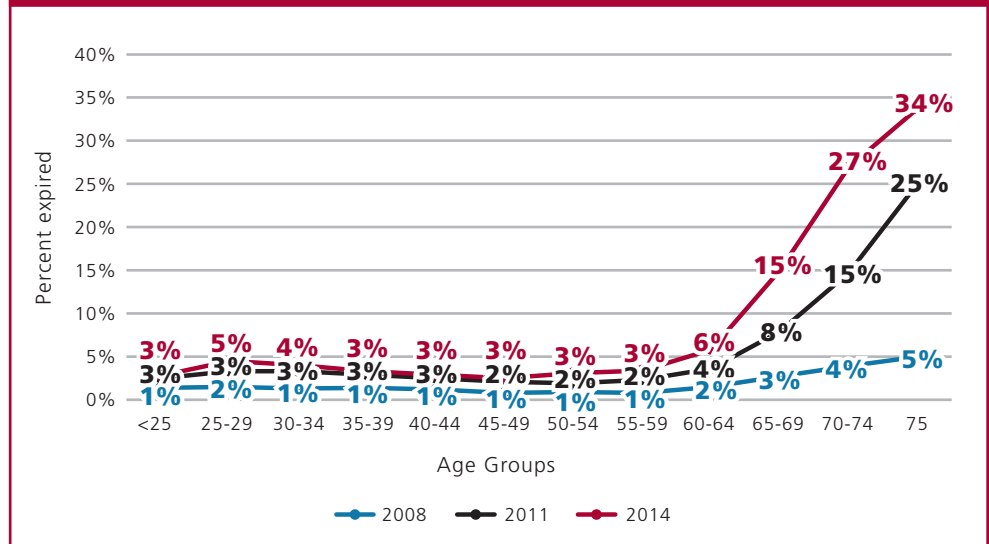

Figure 3. Percent of all RNs in Washington whose licenses expired, by age group, in 2008, 2011 and 2014

3. **From 2008 to 2014 the age distributions of RNs whose licenses expired changed: the percentages of expirations declined among RNs age 35-54 and increased among those age 60-75** (Figure 4). The percentages of expirations were similar for RNs younger than 35 across the time frame studied.

4. **Similar patterns of RN license expirations over time were found across Washington: Expired licenses as a percentage of all RN licenses has increased.** In all 12 of Washington's Workforce Development Areas (WDAs), the actual number and the percentage of all RNs letting their licenses expire increased over the 6 years from 2008 to 2014. Changes for each WDA are shown in Figure 5. Figure 6 shows the location of WDAs across Washington State.

Figure 4. Age distribution of expired Washington RN licenses in 2008, 2011 and 2014
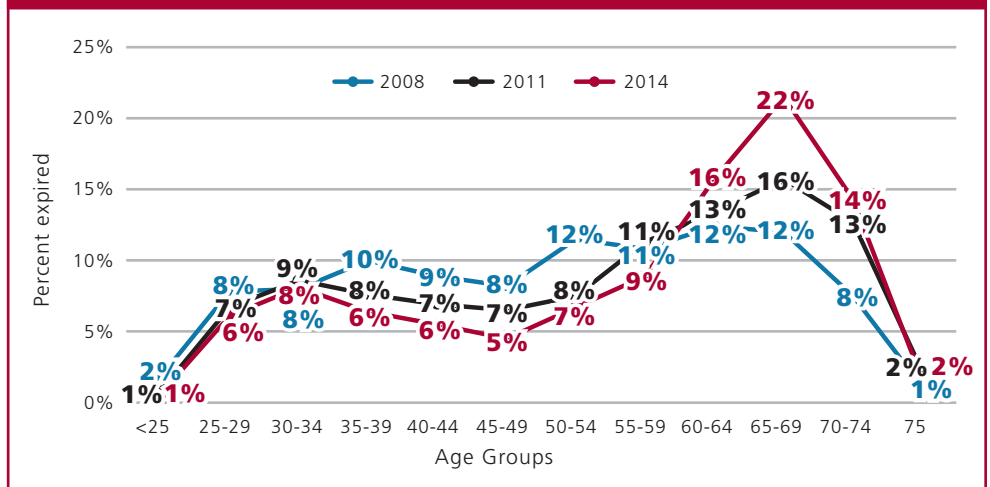

Figure 5. Percent of all Washington RN Licenses Expired by WDA in 2008, 2011 and 2014
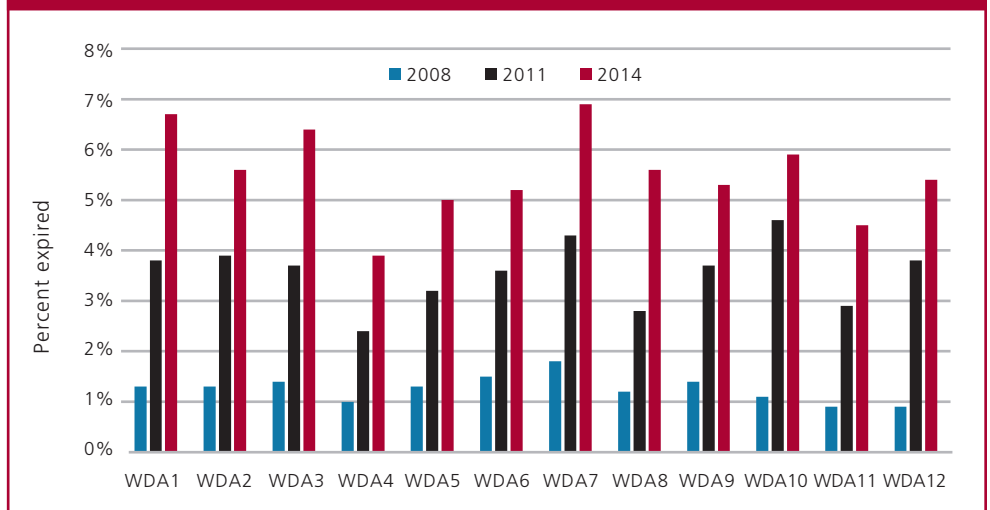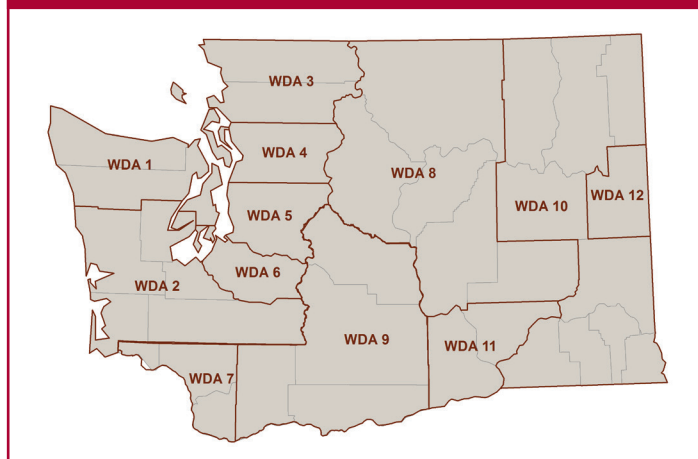

Figure 6. Location of Workforce Development Areas (WDAs) in Washington

5. **Higher percentages of RN licenses expired in rural areas than in urban areas of Washington in 2011 and 2014.** While in 2008 the percentages of all licenses that expired were the same in rural and urban areas, the percentages increased in 2011 and 2014, with greater increases in rural compared with urban areas (Figure 7).

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

While increases in RN license expirations among the oldest RNs should be expected as "baby boomers" in Washington's RN workforce enter retirement age, this study's findings show that expirations have increased for all RN age groups (although at lower rates for younger nurses).

Figure 7. Percent of Washington RN licenses expired in rural compared with urban areas in 2008, 2011, 2014

Two factors may be influencing the increase in license expirations among younger RNs. Younger, more mobile RNs pursuing opportunities for themselves or following a spouse might allow their Washington professional licenses to expire if they move out of state. A second factor may be the requirement implemented by the state in 2011 mandating 531 practice hours and 45 continuing clinical education hours every 3 years for license renewal. RNs who are not actively practicing as nurses may allow their licenses to expire rather than meet the new requirement, even though they risk having to take a refresher course to renew their license later.

The increase in what appears to be age-related retirement among Washington's RNs is not unexpected, but it represents a major loss of nursing experience from the workforce. It may be worth considering ways to retain these professionals in the workforce longer to serve as mentors to new RNs, such as by providing more flexibility in hours and workloads for older RNs.

Possibly of greater concern to health workforce planners are cases where RNs fail to renew their licenses because of dissatisfaction with nursing as a career or inability to obtain stable employment. A survey of RNs who dropped their Washington State licenses in 2002 and 2003 found that in 2004, 23% were not retired, not licensed in another state and not working in nursing.[3] Among this group, 86% responded that they still considered themselves to be nurses, but nearly two thirds (62%) said they would never practice nursing again. The top reasons cited by these RNs in 2004 were disability, high job stress, the need to care for a family member, concerns about patient safety, and finding a non-nursing job that better suited them. The data used for the analyses in this 2014 report came from professional license records alone and were not adequate to distinguish why RNs in Washington failed to renew their licenses in more recent years. To further explore the topic would require a survey of RNs in order to validate assumptions and assess reasons why RNs did not renew their licenses. Such a study could update the information collected in 2004 in order to inform strategies to reduce RN license expiration rates and help stabilize and strengthen Washington's nurse workforce.

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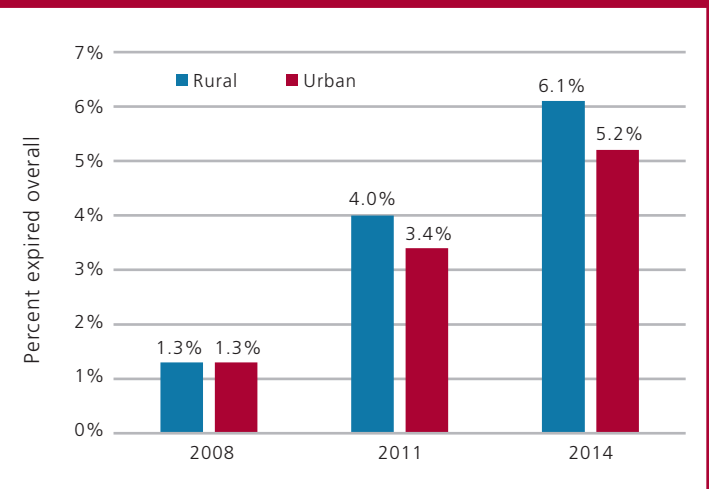
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FUNDING

SUGGESTED CITATION

Skillman SM, Andrilla CHA, Ostergard S. *Washington State registered nurses – Analysis of RNs who did not renew their licenses: 2008-2014*. Seattle, WA: WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, Sept. 2014.

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