

Practitioner Forum

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VALOR: A Win-Win for VA Medical Centers and BSN Students

The VA Learning Opportunity Residency (VALOR) is a national program that was established to attract and retain highly qualified, well educated nurses in the VA health care system. According to Marisa Palkuti, director of the VA's Health Care Retention and Recruitment Office, the impetus for this effort is to adjoin with the nursing hiring pipeline and encourage newly graduated nurses to apply for employment at the VA (oral communication, May 2010).

The VALOR program began in 1990 and provides the opportunity for senior students of baccalaureate nursing programs (BSNs) that are accredited by the National League for Nurses or the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education to participate in a paid, hands-on learning experience through a residency at a VA medical center (VAMC). The program requirements are uniform nationwide and require each student to be a citizen of the United States, to have a minimum grade point average of 3.0, and to not have an employment commitment following graduation. In other words, the VALOR student should be free to apply for employment at the VA. Prospective candidates also must provide transcripts and letters of reference from 2 faculty members and the dean of their school of nursing. VA facilities that

are interested in participating in the VALOR program must request positions in a written proposal submitted to Glenda Fuller at the Healthcare Retention and Recruitment Office in New Orleans, Louisiana. The chosen facilities receive between 1 and 10 VALOR positions.

Each of the 2 phases of the nursing VALOR program provides the BSN student with 400 hours of experience. VALOR I occurs over the summer months and VALOR II occurs during the academic school year until the student graduates. After completing VALOR I, the student can opt to participate in VALOR II. According to Mike Smith, human resource specialist at the Salem VA Medical Center (SVAMC), Salem, Virginia, the VALOR student earns 80% of registered nurse (RN)-1 level-1 pay, which is based on geographic location. Students who participate in the VALOR program and are subsequently hired after graduation start at a higher pay rate compared with new graduates who did not participate in the program (oral communication, May 2010).

One of the goals of the VALOR program is to increase the student's skill level with the use of a BSN preceptor who mentors the student one-on-one. The students receive a variety of experiences in, but not limited to, the following areas: intensive care, step down, emergency medicine, psychiatry, radiology, women's health, oncology, home health, and the operating room. They also attend lectures, see autopsies, and spend time with various health care professionals employed in respiratory care, microbiology, and physical therapy to learn each aspect of the interdisciplinary health care team. Each student also

spends a few days with a nurse practitioner to learn how to perform physical assessments—an essential skill for the new nurse.

In addition, students obtain experience in creating a presentation. They present a team research project to staff nurses and the nurse executive committee that incorporates a literature review involving evidenced-based nursing practices. In past years, projects have included horizontal violence and the oral-systemic disease connection. The VALOR program also provides the student with input into their educational needs. Presenting an array of clinical opportunities based on the student's interest, the VALOR program allows the student to explore various roles of the RN. Exposing students to a wide range of experiences can help them decide what specialty to pursue following graduation. This program has proven to be a win-win, both for the VA (from a recruitment point of view) and for the students who receive hands-on learning experiences.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE VALOR STUDENT

Looking at the program through the VALOR student's eyes can reflect how truly important the program is to the development of future nurses. Danielle Whitley, a 2007 VALOR student at the SVAMC and current employee of the VA, contends, "Being able to see several different units in the hospital gave me an overview of what I might be interested in doing and made me comfortable applying at the VA for a job" (oral communication, August 2009). Regan Levidiotis, a 2008 VALOR student and current employee at the SVAMC, states, "The VALOR made me want to work at the VA for my career.

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I may have considered it, but the VALOR sealed the deal. My experience exposed me to the veteran population. The culture is diverse and we are all united by our concerns for the veterans and caring for them" (oral communication, August 2009). Jonathon Pender, a 2009 VALOR student at the SVAMC, says, "As a student, we experienced many feelings. Some pleasant and noble, especially when a patient who had been admitted a month ago finally takes his first steps out of the VA to go home to a loving family. You take pride in knowing you were an integral part of this patient's success. Some emotions were not as pleasant and confirmed just how cruel the world and life can be. We often shared experiences with our cohorts and preceptors. I remember my first code experience, standing there shaking while the adrenaline rushed through my system and a feeling of helplessness came over me. Then I remember the thank you from a patient and how remarkably proud I am to be in health care. As VALOR students, we were presented with most of the tasks and duties of an RN. We were expected to be proficient in medicine, drugs, and disease progression. Our preceptors challenged us to rise to the occasion and to be confident in our practice. As a novice, the opportunity to work with such seasoned nurses was priceless" (oral communication, September 2009).

VALOR AS A RECRUITMENT TOOL

According to a conversation with Smith, "The VALOR program can help facilities recruit for nursing positions that are difficult to fill. From 2005 to 2008, 55% of the VALORs [students] who participated in the program [at the SVAMC] have been hired" (oral communication, May 2010). Additionally, considering the VALOR students who are participating in the program in 2009 (gradu-

ating in 2010) at the SVAMC, 4 students plan to apply for positions at the facility and 1 student plans to apply at a VAMC in another state.

According to Fuller, who is a VA human resources recruitment and retention specialist, in 2008, there were 402 nursing students in the VALOR program nationwide and 139 were subsequently hired at the VA. In 2009, 235 of 651 participants were hired at the VA. Taking into account the current budget constraints and hiring freezes, the program is successful considering how many VALOR students have been hired during these 2 years. In previous years, the hiring rates were about 50% (oral communication, May 2010). Palkuti says, "There is the growing realization that the supply of appropriately prepared health care workers in this country is inadequate to meet the needs of a growing and diverse population" (oral communication, October 2009).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that 2.8 million nurses will be needed by 2020; this will result in a 36% vacancy rate. Today, there is approximately a 10% vacancy rate.¹ However, from 2000 to 2020, nursing demand is projected to grow by 40% and supply is estimated to increase by only 6%, thus, creating a shortage of RNs.² Training programs and residencies such as the VALOR program benefit the VA health care system. Approximately 100,000 health profession trainees throughout the nation come to the VHA each year for clinical training.³ These trainees become a recruitment pool. The goal of the VA is to actively recruit these students to become full-time employees following graduation.³

The VALOR program is not just limited to nursing; the VA also supports VALOR programs for medical technology. In 2007, the pharmacy VALOR program also was added to address the VA's need for pharmacists.³

For fiscal year (FY) 2010, 350 new VALOR I positions were approved for nursing, 3 positions for medical technology, and 46 positions for pharmacology students. In addition, 506 students are continuing in the VALOR II program. The total cost of the VALOR program for FY 2010 is reported to be \$5,097,039 (Fuller and Palkuti, oral communication, May 2010). According to Palkuti, even considering the current budgetary issues, the VALOR program will remain viable for the near future.

The VALOR program has proven to be a valuable tool for recruiting recent BSN graduates at the SVAMC. The National Advisory on Nurse Education and Practice projected that, by 2010, two-thirds of the nursing workforce should hold a BSN.⁴ Although that initiative for U.S. nurses has not been met, the VALOR program can help the VA meet this objective. According to Susan Lundy, VA nursing outcomes database coordinator for the SVAMC, as of 2009, 57% of direct care VA RNs nationwide have a bachelor's degree. However, this includes nursing and non-nursing degrees (oral communication, May 2010).

CONCLUSION

The previous VALOR students who are now working as RNs contend they had a smoother transition from student to the RN role compared with their classmates. They attribute this to the VALOR experience. From talking with the present and previous VALOR participants, the common consensus is that the program gives them self-confidence; they walk away from the experience having a better understanding of the nursing profession. ●

Author disclosures

The authors report no actual or potential conflicts of interest with regard to this column.

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