

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations representing approximately 4 million of our nation's nursing professionals, including advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs), we write to urgently request support for nurses serving on the frontline of our battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. We are gravely concerned about the psychological health and well-being of nurses and other front-line staff during the COVID-19 public health emergency, and ask the Administration to take these concrete steps to provide psychological first aid:

- 1) Direct federal disaster behavioral health agencies and staff to develop resources to aid nurses and other health care professionals during the COVID-19 public health emergency;
- 2) Activate U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Mental Health Teams and Service Access Teams to address the psychological impacts of COVID-19 on nurses and other health care professionals;
- 3) Deploy Military Disaster Mental Health teams and behavioral health servicemembers to heavily impacted areas to provide psychological assistance and care to civilian nurses and other healthcare workers.

We appreciate your Presidential Proclamations designating May 6th as National Nurses Day and May as National Mental Health Awareness Month. These proclamations recognize the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on the mental and psychological health of nurses and their communities. As you know, nurses in many specialties are the primary providers of patient care, and their psychological health and well-being are essential to addressing the COVID-19 public health crisis. Nurses are not only 'first responders' but also 'sustained responders' for patients and their families,ⁱ which places them at greater risk for compassion fatigue, emotional exhaustion, burnout, depression, substance use disorders, and suicide.

Research has documented that nurses currently engaged in treating COVID-19, and earlier with severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) patients, report more severe degrees of psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia than other healthcare workers.^{ii,iii} Nurses are at significantly higher risk to complete suicide than the general population, with work-related stressors being a greater contributing factor.^{iv,v} In COVID-19 care, nurses are facing extraordinary workloads, often without adequate access to personal protective equipment (PPE). In recent surveys, nurses reported extreme to moderate concern about the safety of their family and friends (87%), about adequate testing (84%), and about access to PPE (75%).^{vi}

The social isolation of quarantine measures contributes to loneliness and presents additional risks to nurses' psychological health.^{vii} High death rates, unique to COVID-19, increase "second victim" grief and despair; nurses are often the only person present as patients die alone without their loved ones. Among nursing staffs, recent graduates may be especially vulnerable to the extremes of the pandemic's work environment. Adjustments in employment situations to meet the most immediate needs of care, can result in further unrest and feelings of inadequacy. Importantly, concerns related to the stigma of

perceived weakness by being unable to meet demands or expressing the need for mental health support can present barriers to help.

According to the American Psychological Association, providing evidence-based interventions, such as Psychological First Aid (PFA) and Skills for Psychological Recovery (SPR), to those going through a crisis can increase resiliency and reduce anxiety. Therefore, there is an urgent need to reach all nurses, including APRNs, in their work settings to identify those experiencing extreme distress or nearing a crisis state and to provide them the tools and support they need to improve their psychological health and wellness. As they struggle to keep pace with the demands being placed on them, we ask the Administration to take the following steps to support nurses:

Direct federal disaster behavioral health agencies and staff to develop resources to aid nurses and other health care professionals during the COVID-19 public health emergency

The federal behavioral health support led by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services during disasters is typically oriented toward assisting in discrete areas. For the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to adopt a public health approach supporting frontline health care providers nationwide. This should include the provision of technical assistance, educational resources, and grants to build capacity for peer-to-peer psychological first aid training, and the immediate deployment of trained behavioral health responders.

Activate U.S. Public Health Service's (USPHS) Mental Health Teams and Service Access Teams to address the psychological impacts of COVID-19 on nurses and other health care professionals

The USPHS Mental Health Teams can be deployed in response to public health emergencies to carry out assessments and screenings for suicide risk, acute and chronic stress reactions, substance abuse, and other mental health disorders, and support the development of behavioral health training programs. The teams are also trained in the provision of psychotherapy, psychological first aid, crisis intervention, and other behavioral health interventions to prevent and treat mental illness and substance use disorders. We request the Administration immediately work with State leaders and activate these teams to provide urgently needed mental and psychological support for health care professionals.

Deploy Military Disaster Mental Health teams and behavioral health servicemembers to heavily impacted areas to provide psychological assistance and care to civilian nurses and other healthcare workers

Armed Forces behavioral health professionals and servicemembers trained in psychological first aid could provide an urgently needed surge in treatment capacity to COVID-19 hotspots, and provide assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of mental health and substance use disorders among civilian nurses and other frontline staff. In addition to the direct provision of services, such a deployment would put 'boots on the ground' and boost morale. This would send a powerful signal to frontline providers about the importance of psychological well-being and combat the stigma associated with seeking help.

We believe these steps will save lives—both of nurses and the patients in their care, right now and after the national public health emergency is over. Research suggests the psychological impact of disease

outbreaks and disasters on healthcare providers can last for several years.^{viii,ix} We urgently ask for your help to preserve and protect the profession for the sake of our nation's future.

Thank you for taking action to address this critical issue. We look forward to working with you to overcome this crisis and strengthen our healthcare delivery system.

Most respectfully,

American Association of Critical-Care Nurses
American Association of Nurse Anesthetists
American Association of Nurse Practitioners
American College of Nurse-Midwives
American Society of Peri-Anesthesia Nurses
International Nurses Society on Addictions
National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National League for Nursing

cc: The Vice President

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II, Secretary of DHHS
VADM Jerome M. Adams, M.D., M.P.H., Surgeon General
Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell
Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi
Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer
House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy

ⁱ Boyle, D. A. (2011). Countering compassion fatigue: A requisite nursing agenda. *The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, 16(1).

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