
AACN STANDARDS FOR ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING HEALTHY WORK ENVIRONMENTS

A Journey to Excellence, 2nd edition

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2001, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) made a commitment to actively promote the creation of healthy work environments that support and foster excellence in patient care wherever acute and critical care nurses practice. *AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments: A Journey to Excellence*, issued in 2005, responded to mounting evidence that unhealthy work environments contribute to medical errors, ineffective delivery of care, and conflict and stress among health care professionals. The standards uniquely identified previously discounted systemic behaviors that can result in unsafe conditions and obstruct the ability of individuals and organizations to achieve excellence. AACN called for the creation and continual fostering of healthy work environments as an imperative for ensuring patient safety and optimal outcomes, enhancing staff recruitment and retention, and maintaining health care organizations' financial viability.

AACN's seminal work identified 6 essential standards that must be in place to create and ensure a healthy work environment. They provide an evidence-based framework for organizations to create work environments that encourage nurses and their colleagues in every health care profession to practice to their utmost potential, ensuring optimal patient outcomes and professional fulfillment.

Since the first edition of the standards was released, there has been spirited national and international dialogue about the work environment's impact on nurse retention, team effectiveness, patient safety, nurse and patient outcomes, and burnout among health care professionals. Yet workplace studies confirm that unhealthy work environments still exist in many organizations. At no other time in health care's history has there been more turbulence, rapid change, or complexity. Today's work environments demand even more attention to the fundamental issues of these standards, because stakes are high, and patients' lives depend on it.

The original 6 standards remain unchanged. This second edition reflects the emergence of robust evidence acquired since 2005 addressing the concepts described in the standards. The literature strongly supports the tenets of the standards and highlights the urgent need for health care professionals to continue addressing the health of the work environment.

Through this 2nd edition of the standards, AACN recognizes the inextricable links among the quality of the work environment, excellent nursing practice, and patient care outcomes. The organization remains strategically committed to bringing its influence and resources to bear on creating work and health care environments that are safe, healing, humane, and respectful of the rights, responsibilities, needs, and contributions of all people — including patients, their families, nurses, and other health care professionals.

This publication is derived from *AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments: A Journey to Excellence*, 2nd Ed.

Both documents are available for download at the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses Web site <www.aacn.org>

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AMERICAN
ASSOCIATION
of CRITICAL-CARE
NURSES

6 essential standards

The 6 standards for establishing and sustaining healthy work environments represent evidence-based and relationship-centered principles of professional performance. Each standard is considered essential in that effective and sustainable outcomes do not emerge when any standard is considered optional.

The standards align directly with the core competencies for health care professionals recommended by the National Academy of Medicine (NAM). They support the education of all health care professionals and echo NAM's call “to deliver patient-centered care as members of an interdisciplinary team, emphasizing evidence-based practice, quality improvement approaches, and informatics.”

The standards are neither detailed nor exhaustive. They do not directly address dimensions such as physical safety, clinical practice, clinical and academic education, and credentialing, all of which are addressed by a multitude of statutory, regulatory and professional agencies, and other organizations.

With these standards we aspire to shine a light on the dimension these frameworks often overlook — the human factor.

This document is designed to be used as a foundation for thoughtful reflection, engaged dialogue, and bold action related to the current realities of work environments. Critical elements required for successful implementation accompany each standard. Working collaboratively, individuals and groups in an organization should determine the priority and depth of application required to ensure each standard is met.

The standards for establishing and sustaining healthy work environments:

Skilled Communication

Nurses must be as proficient in communication skills as they are in clinical skills.

True Collaboration

Nurses must be relentless in pursuing and fostering true collaboration.

Effective Decision Making

Nurses must be valued and committed partners in making policy, directing and evaluating clinical care, and leading organizational operations.

Appropriate Staffing

Staffing must ensure the effective match between patient needs and nurse competencies.

Meaningful Recognition

Nurses must be recognized and must recognize others for the value each brings to the work of the organization.

Authentic Leadership

Nurse leaders must fully embrace the imperative of a healthy work environment, authentically live it, and engage others in its achievement.

essential	Absolutely required; not to be used up or sacrificed. Indispensable. Fundamental.
standard	Authoritative statement articulated and promulgated by the profession, by which the quality of practice, service, or education can be judged.
critical elements	Structures, processes, programs, and behaviors required for a standard to be achieved.

standard 1

SKILLED COMMUNICATION

NURSES MUST BE AS PROFICIENT IN COMMUNICATION SKILLS AS THEY ARE IN CLINICAL SKILLS.

critical elements

- The health care organization provides team members with support for and access to interprofessional education and coaching that develop critical communication skills, including self-awareness, inquiry/dialogue, conflict management, negotiation, advocacy, and listening.
- Nurses and all other team members are accountable for identifying personal learning and professional growth needs related to communication skills.
- Skilled communicators focus on finding solutions and achieving desirable outcomes.
- Skilled communicators seek to protect and advance collaborative relationships among colleagues.
- Skilled communicators invite and hear all relevant perspectives.
- Skilled communicators call upon goodwill and mutual respect to build consensus and arrive at common understanding.
- Skilled communicators demonstrate congruence between words and actions, holding others accountable for doing the same.
- Skilled communicators have access to appropriate communication technologies and are proficient in their use.
- Skilled communicators seek input on their communication styles and strive to continually improve.
- The health care organization establishes zero-tolerance policies and enforces them to address and eliminate abuse and other disrespectful behavior in the workplace.
- The health care organization establishes formal structures and processes that ensure effective and respectful information sharing among patients, families, and the health care team.
- The health care organization establishes systems that require individuals and teams to formally evaluate the impact of communication on clinical and financial outcomes, and the work environment.
- The health care organization includes communication as a criterion in its formal performance appraisal system, and team members demonstrate skilled communication to qualify for professional advancement.

standard 2

TRUE COLLABORATION

NURSES MUST BE RELENTLESS IN PURSUING AND FOSTERING TRUE COLLABORATION.

critical elements

- The health care organization provides team members with support for and access to interprofessional education and coaching that develop collaboration skills.
- The health care organization creates, uses and evaluates processes that define each team member's accountability for collaboration and how unwillingness to collaborate will be addressed.
- The health care organization creates, uses, and evaluates operational structures that ensure the decision-making authority of nurses is acknowledged and incorporated as the norm.
- The health care organization ensures unrestricted access to structured forums, such as ethics committees, and makes available the time and resources needed to resolve disputes among all critical participants, including patients, families, and the health care team.
- Every team member embraces true collaboration as an ongoing process and invests in its development to ensure a sustained culture of collaboration.
- Every team member contributes to the achievement of common goals by giving power and respect to each person's voice, integrating individual differences, resolving competing interests, and safeguarding the essential contribution each makes in order to achieve optimal outcomes.
- Every team member acts with a high level of personal integrity and holds others accountable for doing the same.
- Team members master skilled communication, an essential element of true collaboration.
- Each team member demonstrates competence appropriate to his or her role and responsibilities.
- Nurse and physician leaders are equal partners in modeling and fostering true collaboration.

standard 3

EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING

NURSES MUST BE VALUED AND COMMITTED PARTNERS IN MAKING POLICY, DIRECTING AND EVALUATING CLINICAL CARE, AND LEADING ORGANIZATIONAL OPERATIONS.

critical elements

- The health care organization clearly articulates organizational values, and team members incorporate these values when making decisions.
- The health care organization ensures that nurses in positions from the bedside to the boardroom participate in all levels of decision making.
- The health care organization provides team members with support for and access to ongoing interprofessional education and development programs focusing on strategies that ensure collaborative decision making. Program content includes mutual goal setting, negotiation, facilitation, conflict management, systems thinking, and performance improvement.
- The health care organization has operational structures in place that ensure the perspectives of patients and their families are incorporated into decisions affecting patient care.
- Individual team members share accountability for effective decision making by acquiring necessary skills, mastering relevant content, assessing situations accurately, sharing fact-based information, communicating opinions clearly, and inquiring actively.
- The health care organization establishes systems, such as structured forums involving appropriate departments and health care professions, to facilitate data-driven decisions.
- The health care organization establishes deliberate decision making processes that ensure respect for the rights of every individual, incorporate all key perspectives, and designate clear accountability.
- The health care organization has fair and effective processes in place at all levels to objectively evaluate the results of decisions, including delayed decisions and indecision.

standard 4

APPROPRIATE STAFFING

STAFFING MUST ENSURE THE EFFECTIVE MATCH BETWEEN PATIENT NEEDS AND NURSE COMPETENCIES.

critical elements

- The health care organization has staffing policies in place that are solidly grounded in ethical principles and support the professional obligation of nurses to provide high-quality care.
- Nurses participate in all organizational phases of the staffing process from education and planning – including matching nurses’ competencies with patients’ assessed needs – through evaluation.
- Nurses seek opportunities to obtain knowledge and skills required to demonstrate competence to ensure an effective match with the needs of patients and their families.
- The health care organization has formal processes in place to evaluate the effect of staffing decisions on patient and system outcomes. This evaluation includes an analysis when patient needs and nurse competencies are mismatched and how often contingency plans are implemented.
- The health care organization has a system in place that facilitates team members’ use of staffing and outcomes data to develop more effective staffing models.
- The health care organization provides support services at every level of activity to ensure nurses can optimally focus on the priorities and requirements of patient and family care.
- The health care organization adopts technologies that increase the effectiveness of nursing care delivery. Nurses are engaged in the selection, adaptation, and evaluation of these technologies.

standard 5

MEANINGFUL RECOGNITION

NURSES MUST BE RECOGNIZED AND MUST RECOGNIZE OTHERS FOR
THE VALUE EACH BRINGS TO THE WORK OF THE ORGANIZATION.

critical elements

- The health care organization has a comprehensive system in place that includes formal processes and structured forums that ensure a sustainable focus on recognizing all team members for their contributions and the value they bring to the work of the organization.
- The health care organization establishes a systematic process for all team members to learn about its recognition system and how to participate by recognizing the contributions of colleagues and the value they bring to the organization.
- The health care organization's recognition system reaches from the bedside to the boardroom, ensuring individuals receive recognition consistent with their personal definition of meaning, fulfillment, development, and advancement at every stage of their professional career.
- The health care organization has processes in place to nominate team members for recognition in local, regional, and national venues.
- The health care organization's recognition system includes processes that validate the recognition is meaningful to those being acknowledged.
- Team members understand that everyone is responsible for playing an active role in the organization's recognition program and meaningfully recognizing contributions.
- The health care organization regularly and comprehensively evaluates its recognition system, ensuring effective programs that help move the organization toward a sustainable culture of excellence that values meaningful recognition.

standard 6

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

NURSE LEADERS MUST FULLY EMBRACE THE IMPERATIVE OF A HEALTHY WORK ENVIRONMENT, AUTHENTICALLY LIVE IT, AND ENGAGE OTHERS IN ITS ACHIEVEMENT.

critical elements

- The health care organization provides support for and access to education and coaching to ensure that nurse leaders develop and enhance knowledge and abilities in authentic leadership, skilled communication, effective decision making, true collaboration, meaningful recognition, and appropriate staffing.
- Nurse leaders demonstrate an understanding of the requirements and dynamics at the point of care and within this context successfully translate the vision of a healthy work environment.
- Nurse leaders excel at generating visible enthusiasm for achieving the standards that create and sustain healthy work environments.
- Nurse leaders ensure the design of systems necessary to effectively implement and sustain standards for healthy work environments.
- The health care organization ensures that nurse leaders are appropriately positioned in their pivotal role in creating and sustaining healthy work environments. This role includes participation in key decision making forums, access to essential information, and the authority to make necessary decisions.
- The health care organization facilitates the efforts of nurse leaders to create and sustain a healthy work environment by providing the necessary time and financial and human resources.
- The health care organization makes a formal mentoring program available for all nurse leaders. Nurse leaders actively engage in the mentoring of nurses in all roles and levels of experience.
- Nurse leaders role model skilled communication, true collaboration, effective decision making, meaningful recognition, and authentic leadership.
- The health care organization includes the individual's influence on creating and sustaining a healthy work environment as a criterion in each nurse leader's performance appraisal. Nurse leaders demonstrate leadership in creating and sustaining a healthy work environment in order to achieve professional advancement.
- The health care organization ensures progress toward creating and sustaining a healthy work environment is evaluated at regular intervals using tools designed for that purpose. The AACN Healthy Work Environment Assessment™ tool is available at www.aacn.org/hwe.
- Nurse leaders and team members mutually and objectively evaluate the impact of leadership processes and decisions on the organization's progress toward creating and sustaining a healthy work environment.

CALL TO ACTION

Compelling evidence confirms that healthy work environments are essential to ensure patient safety, enhance staff recruitment and retention, and maintain an organization's financial viability. Inattention to the standards put forth in this document poses a serious obstacle to establishing and sustaining healthy work environments. Without them, the journey to excellence is impossible.

This document's evidence-based framework was developed to guide health care organizations in elevating the required competencies to the highest strategic and operational importance. The dialogue that will result from this process must guide the reprioritization and reallocation of resources necessary for healthy work environments.

For the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, issuing these standards in 2005 was the first step in the Association's commitment to transforming health care work environments, so the needs of patients and their families are met, and nurses are empowered to contribute optimally in meeting those needs. AACN remains strategically committed to leading the way in developing and disseminating practical and relevant resources that support individuals and organizations in creating healthy work environments.

AACN calls upon every health care professional, health care organization, and professional association to fulfill their obligation to create healthy work environments where safety becomes the norm and excellence the goal. This vision will only become a reality when these standards and their critical elements have been integrated into everyday practice. This call to action requires the following fundamental shifts in health care work environments by challenging:

Nurses and all health care professionals to:

- Embrace their personal obligation to create healthy work environments.
- Collaborate with others to develop work environments in which individuals hold themselves and others accountable for professional behavior standards.
- Follow through until effective solutions have been realized.

Health care organizations to:

- Adopt and implement these standards as essential and nonnegotiable for all.
- Incorporate principles from these standards into unwavering behavioral and professional expectations for all.
- Establish the organizational systems and structures required for successful education, implementation, and evaluation of the standards, including use of the AACN Healthy Work Environment Assessment tool, available at www.aacn.org/hwe, to track their progress.
- Demonstrate behaviors by example at every level of the organization.
- Recognize, celebrate, and disseminate successful strides that contribute to a healthy work environment.

AACN and the community of nursing to:

- Bring to national attention the urgency, importance, and evidence that healthy work environments have a direct impact on quality of care, patient safety, patient outcomes, nurse morale, and nurse outcomes.
- Promote the standards as essential to establishing and sustaining healthy work environments.
- Continue to develop evidence-based resources to support individuals, organizations, and health care systems in successfully adopting and sustaining implementation of the standards, then recognizing and publicizing their successes.