

AONL Longitudinal Nursing

Leadership Insight Study:

Nurse Leaders' Top Challenges and Areas for Needed Support, July 2020 to November 2023



With funding from the American Organization for Nursing Leadership, the AONL Foundation and Joslin Insight have conducted a longitudinal nursing leadership insight study since July 2020. This fifth report highlights the most recent findings on nurse leaders' challenges, solutions, well-being and areas for needed support.

The latest Longitudinal Nursing Leadership Insight Study examines changes in health care from the perspective of nurse leaders. While still a primary challenge, the state of staff emotional health and well-being is at its best since July 2020. The challenge of travelers and the contingent workforce has also improved substantially since summer 2022. The mounting challenges today are staff recruitment and retention, financial resource availability and workplace violence. This report addresses effective solutions for various aspects, such as interdisciplinary collaboration, listening to direct care nurses and work-life balance.

SURVEY SERIES: JULY 2020, FEBRUARY 2021, AUGUST 2021, AUGUST 2022, NOVEMBER 2023

This survey is the fifth survey in a longitudinal series designed to track several areas over time. This survey, conducted November 8-24, 2023, received 2,477 responses (90% full completions) with a 2.48% margin of error at a 99% confidence level. The first launched in July 2020 with 1,824 leaders completing or partially completing the survey; the second launched in February 2021 with 2,741 responses; the third launched in August 2021 with 1,781 responses; and the fourth launched in August 2022 with 2,336 responses.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

The AONL Foundation fielded this survey to nurse leaders at all levels across the care continuum. The majority identified as white or Caucasian, over the age of 45, and from urban acute care hospitals. Seventy-two percent were either vice presidents, chief nursing officers/chief nursing executives, directors or managers. Specifically, 32% were directors, 23% managers and 13% CNO/CNEs. Forty-three percent of respondents came from short-term acute care hospitals, 14% from health system facilities and 8% from academic health-care providers. Only 2% came from long-term acute care and 1% from post-acute care facilities (i.e., skilled nursing, inpatient rehabilitation). Fifty-two percent indicated their location was urban, with 32% suburban and 16% rural.

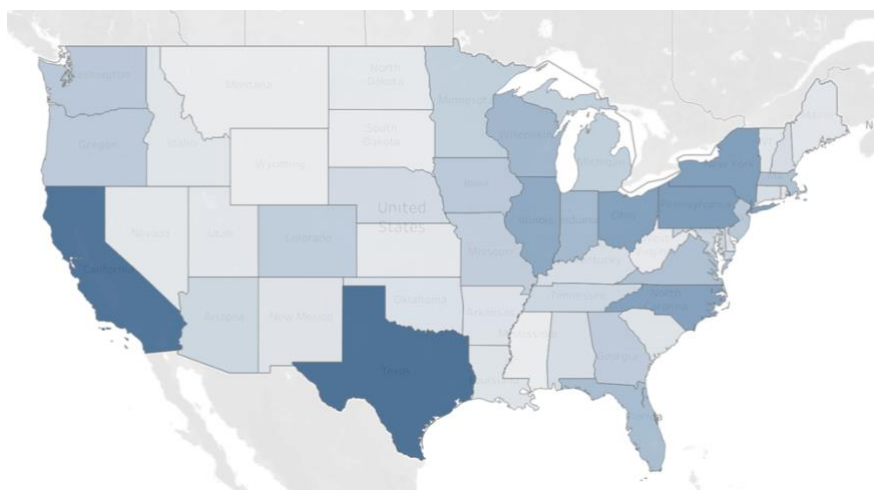


Figure 1 - Respondents' primary work setting zip code, November 2023

TOP CHALLENGES TODAY

While the emotional health and well-being of staff remain a top concern (45%), the issue is now at its best since July 2020. Issues surrounding travelers and the contingent workforce also have diminished by a significant 53% from last year. The growing and emerging challenges in 2023 revolve around staff recruitment and retention (69%); financial resource availability (34%), and workplace violence, bullying, incivility (24%). As challenges have changed over time, the AONL Foundation discontinued asking about access to personal protective equipment and instead inquired about disruptions in the supply chain.

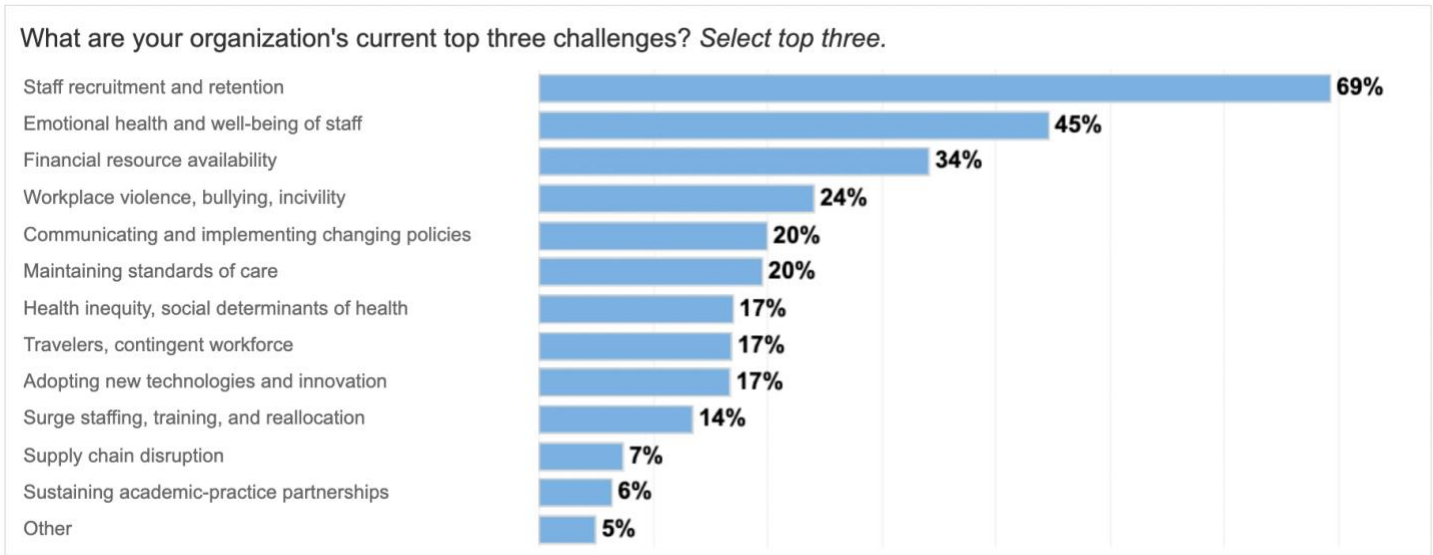


Figure 2 - Nurse leaders indicate their top three challenges, November 2023

TOP CHALLENGES SINCE JULY 2020

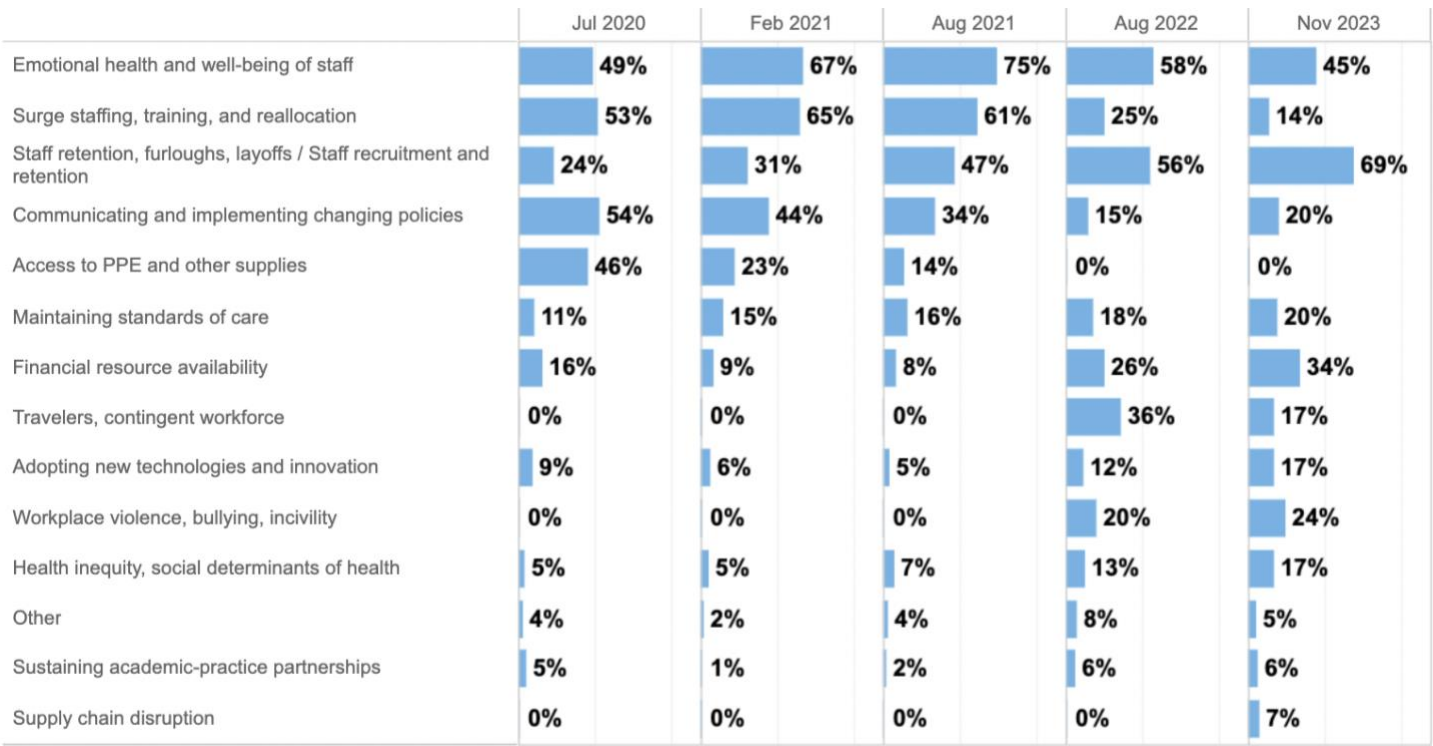


Figure 3 - Nurse leaders indicate their top three challenges, July 2020, February 2021, August 2021, August 2022, November 2023

ABILITY TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES

The survey series has also measured leaders' ability to respond to their respective challenges. Today, the most difficult issues to address are financial resource availability; supply chain disruption; workplace violence; health inequity, and social determinants of health. While still posing a challenge, nurse leaders report they have been most successful in responding to communicating changing policies, maintaining standards of care, and adopting new technologies and innovation. Figure 4 illustrates the total population, but across different roles, there are slight variations in the ability to address their respective challenges.

- **Managers:** sustaining academic practice partnerships; supply chain disruption; financial resource availability; workplace violence, bullying, incivility
- **Directors:** financial resource availability; supply chain disruption; workplace violence, bullying, incivility; health inequity, social determinants of health
- **CNO/CNE:** sustaining academic practice partnerships; supply chain disruption; financial resource availability; health inequity, social determinants of health
- **VP:** financial resource availability; travelers, contingent workforce; health inequity, social determinants of health; workplace violence, bullying, incivility
- **CEO/COO:** workplace violence, bullying, incivility; health inequity, social determinants of health; maintaining standards of care; surge staffing, training, reallocation

As a nurse leader, how effectively do you feel you have been able to address these challenges? On a scale of 1-5, 5 being very well.

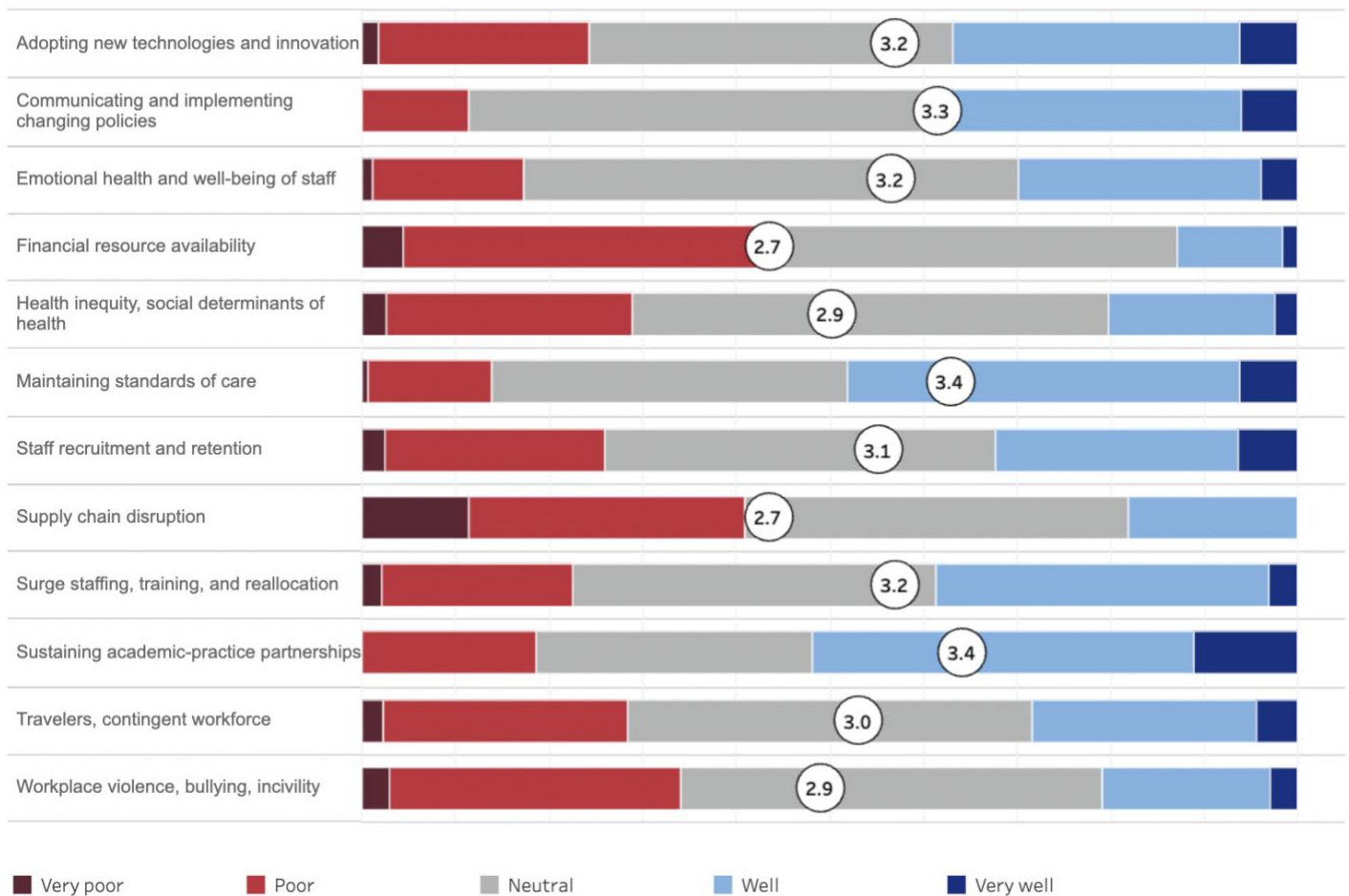


Figure 4 - Nurse leaders indicate the ability to respond to their respective challenges on a 1-5 scale with 5 being very well, November 2023

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE, INTIMIDATION, BULLYING, & INCIVILITY

Workplace violence is one of the top challenges facing health care today. This survey asked whether leaders have witnessed incidents of workplace violence, intimidation, incivility and bullying. The number of respondents who have witnessed violence remained the same as 2022 at 53%. However, when looking at their top challenges, leaders' perception around the issue of workplace violence has increased by 20% year-over-year. This points to a potential elevation in the severity of the issue, even if the incidents might not have risen.

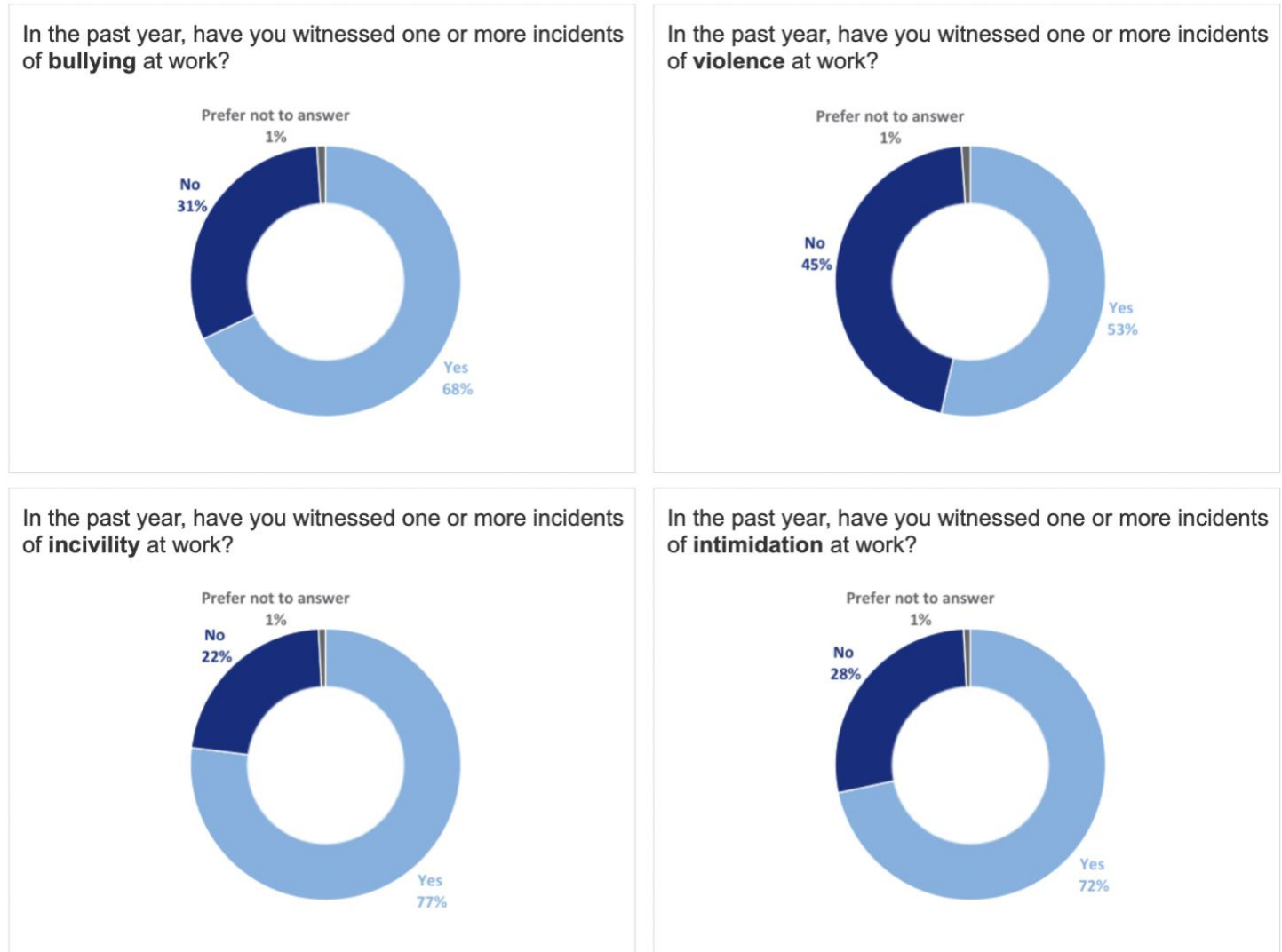


Figure 5 - Nurse leaders indicate whether they have witnessed workplace violence, intimidation, bullying, or incivility in the past year, November 2023

Nurses frequently encounter verbal abuse, physical assaults, and other forms of violence and intimidation from patients, patient families, the public and coworkers, including physicians, other nurses, administration, managers, supervisors, faculty and other staff (Figure 6). This hostile environment not only jeopardizes the safety and well-being of health care workers but also impacts patient care. The rising instances of workplace violence can lead to increased stress, burnout, and a sense of insecurity among health care professionals.

Addressing workplace violence, intimidation, incivility and bullying requires comprehensive strategies, including enhanced security measures, de-escalation training, fostering a culture of safety and providing trauma-informed care to health care workers. It also requires advocacy to raise broader public awareness.

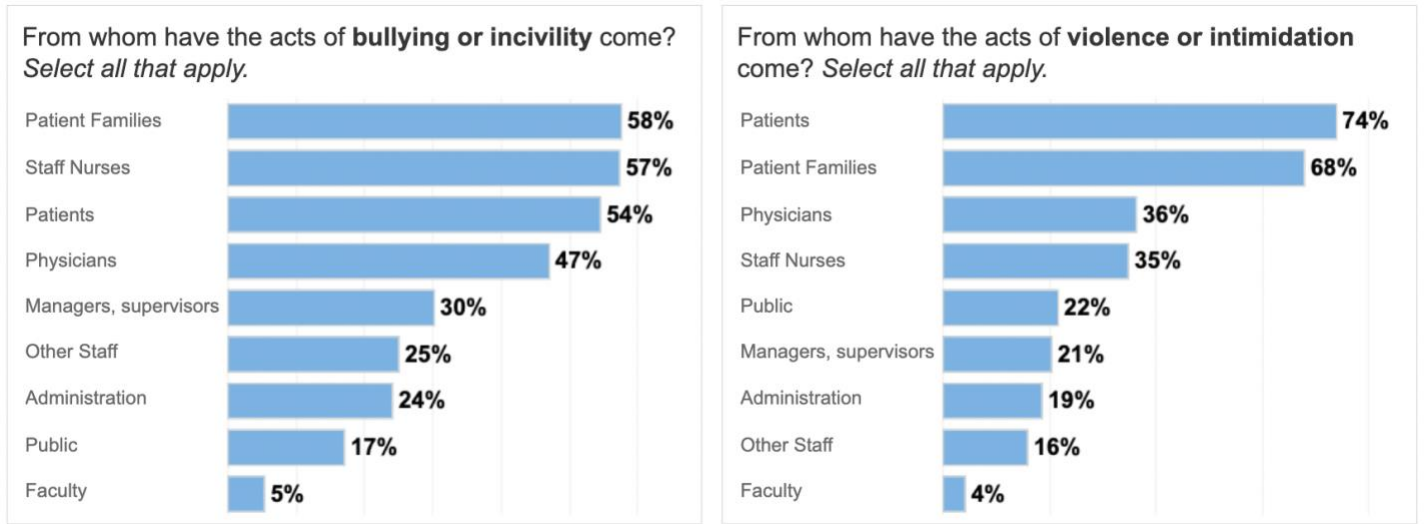


Figure 6 - Nurse leaders indicate the source of workplace violence and bullying, November 2023

SENSE OF BELONGING & EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Based on survey data, nurse leaders' sense of belonging varies across the spectrum. While some report a high (38%) or very high (19%) sense of belonging, others indicate a range from neutral (27%) to low (11%), with instances of feeling very low (4%). This diversity in responses highlights the varied perceptions and experiences among nurse leaders within the context of their workplace. Recognizing these differences is crucial in addressing and fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Regarding emotional health, there has been a slight improvement from last year. However, the data still shows a mix of emotional health states, ranging from very emotionally healthy to not at all emotionally healthy. While a significant number report feeling emotionally healthy (52%) or very emotionally healthy (12%), a notable portion indicates a neutral state (24%) or even not being emotionally healthy (11%) and not at all emotionally healthy (1%). It's crucial to recognize the need for continued efforts to support nurse leaders, especially nurse managers who fare worse in cultivating and maintaining healthier emotional well-being. Creating a nurturing environment for nurse leaders is vital to ensure their resilience, support and effectiveness in their roles.

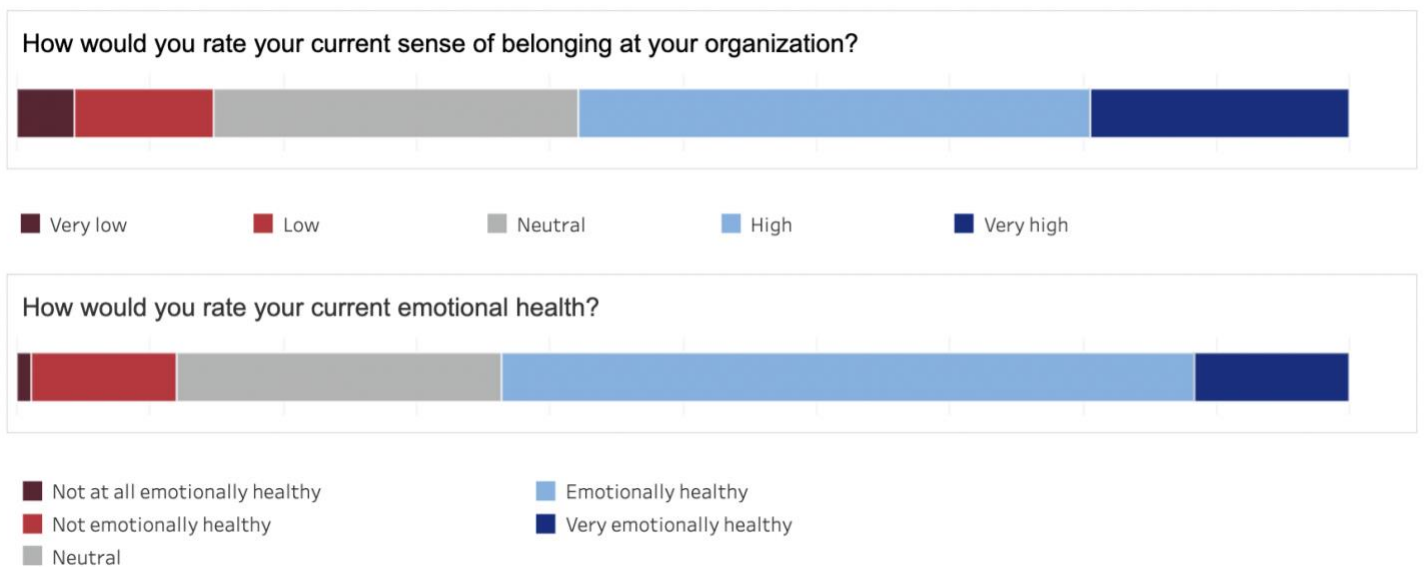


Figure 7 - Nurse leaders indicate their current sense of belonging and current emotional health, November 2023

EMOTIONAL HEALTH SINCE FEBRUARY 2021

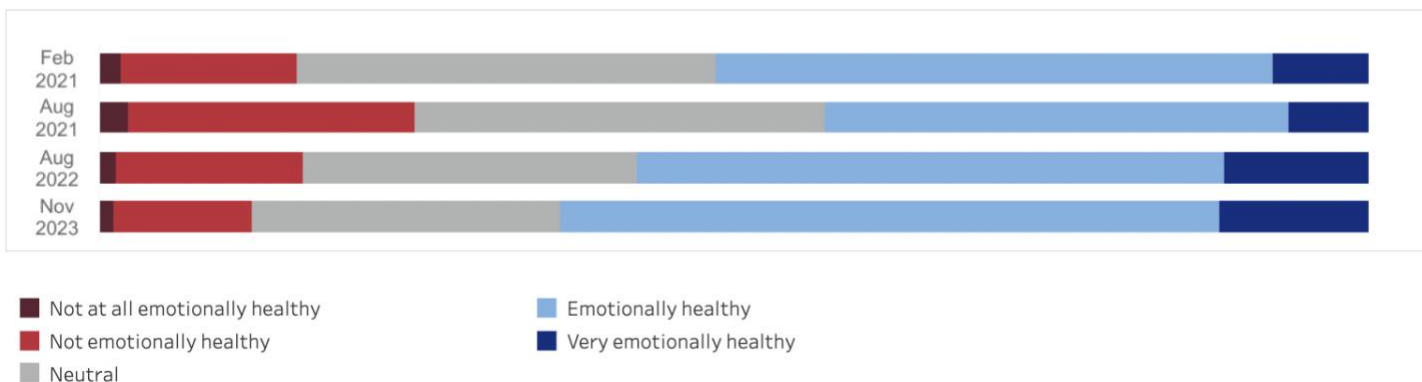


Figure 8 - Nurse leaders indicate their current emotional health, February 2021, August 2021, August 2022, November 2023

ADVANCEMENTS REDESIGNING HEALTH CARE

The AONL Foundation asked nurse leaders to identify two advancements they feel their organization will continue to use in the redesign of health care. Survey respondents identified increased interdisciplinary collaboration (28%) and a team-based approach to models of care (27%) as the top two advancements. Heightened adoption of innovative patient care technologies (22%) and increased utilization of virtual nursing (20%) were the other top responses. These trends underscore a shift in nursing practices, showcasing a strong focus on interdisciplinary collaboration, innovative care models, patient care technologies and virtual care.

The chart below represents the total population; by role, these are the top choices:

- **Manager:** increased interdisciplinary collaboration; team-based approach, team-based models of care
- **Director:** team-based approach, team-based models of care; increased interdisciplinary collaboration
- **CNO/CNE:** increased utilization of virtual care; increased interdisciplinary collaboration
- **VP:** innovative patient care technologies; increased utilization of virtual nursing
- **CEO/COO:** increased interdisciplinary collaboration; expanded influence and decision-making authority

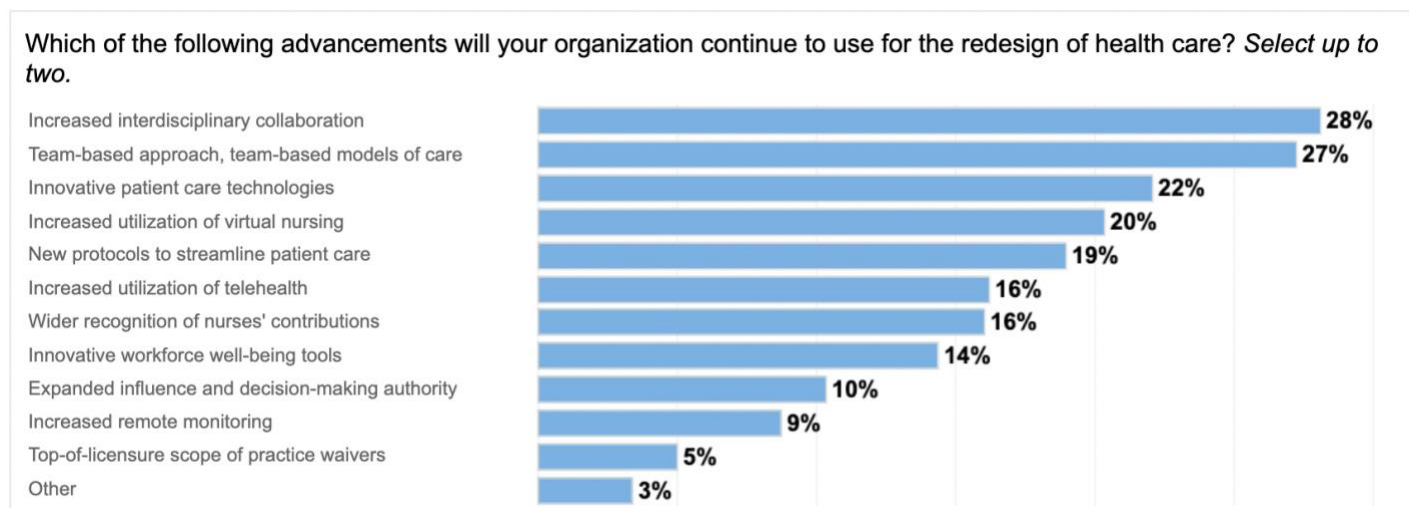


Figure 9 - Nurse leaders indicate two advancements their organization is likely to use for the redesign of health care, November 2023

SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVING STAFFING

The AONL Foundation asked nurse leaders to rate the effectiveness of various solutions their organization implemented to improve staffing on a scale of 1-5. According to the response data, listening and responding to nurse feedback (3.5), allowing days off when necessary (3.5), increasing nurse recognition (3.4), and offering flex scheduling (3.3) had the most positive impact on improving staffing situations. On the other hand, strategies such as adding non-clinical staff (2.7), implementing fatigue countermeasures (2.7) and increasing support services (2.8) garnered lower scores, suggesting they might have a more moderate impact in addressing staffing challenges within organizations. The findings underline the nuanced effectiveness of different solutions and signal a need for tailored approaches to meet staffing needs effectively.

How effective have the following solutions been at improving the staffing situation at your organization? *On a scale of 1-5, 5 being very effective.*

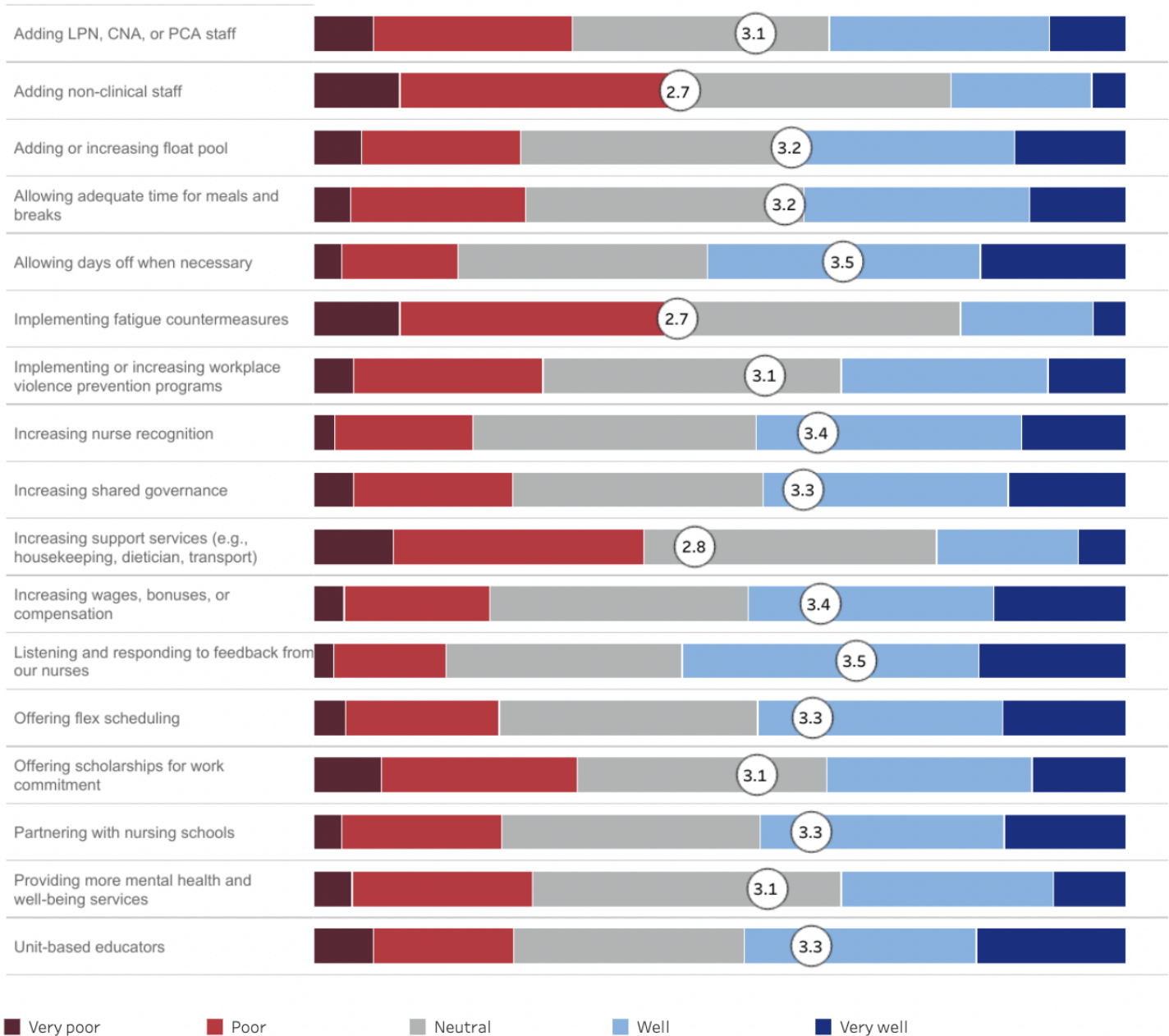


Figure 10 - Nurse rate the impact solutions have on improving the staffing situation at their organization, November 2023

DAY IN THE LIFE OF A NURSE LEADER

Beginning in 2022, the AONL Foundation added a series of questions to provide insight into the daily tasks of nurse leaders to understand what tasks bring them the most joy and frustration. The first question in the series of questions asks nurse leaders to select all tasks that have required their attention in the past week. In 2023, nurse leaders report spending more time mentoring, guiding and giving performance reviews and handling budgets. Conversely, nurse leaders report spending less time on conflict resolution than last year. Following this question, the survey asked leaders to identify five tasks that bring the most joy and five that bring the most frustration. Nurse leaders report employee engagement and retention efforts; awards and recognition; mentoring, guiding and performance reviews bring them the most joy. Nurse leaders report feeling frustration addressing capacity issues and constraints; incident reports, injuries and complaints; and conflict resolution. While capacity issues continue to cause nurse leaders the highest frustration, the score improved by 13% from 2022 to 2023.

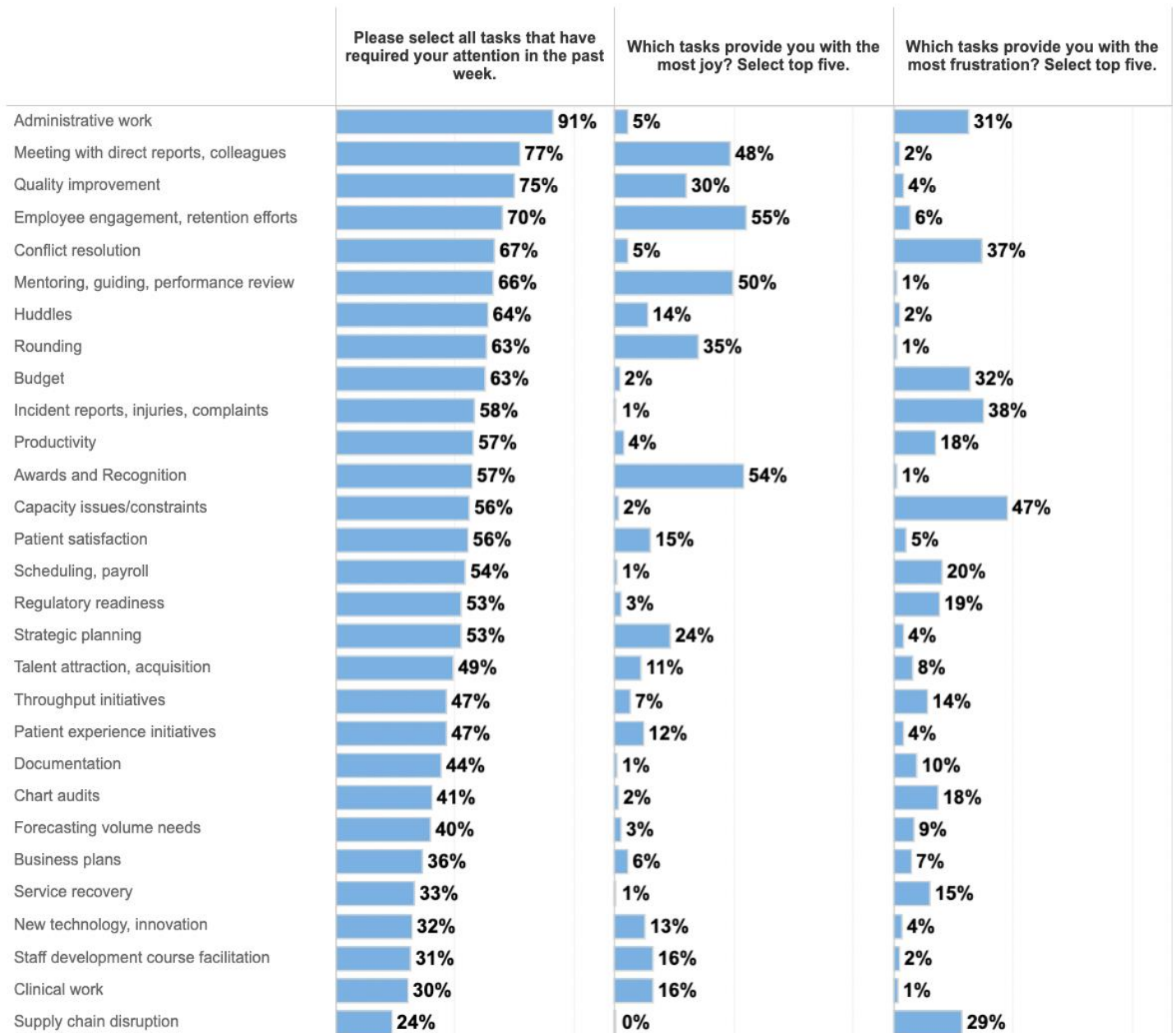


Figure 11 - Nurse leaders indicate tasks completed in the past week, five tasks that create joy, and five tasks that create frustration, November 2023

INTENT TO LEAVE

This survey shows a marginal improvement in nurse leaders' intent to leave with a 5% decrease in those planning to leave from 2022 to 2023. The survey examined intent to leave based on roles. The largest cohort of nurse leaders reporting intent to leave exists in the C-Suite with 15% of CNOs/CNEs planning to leave their positions within the next six months, contrasting with 12% of managers and 10% of directors. Among nurse leaders contemplating leaving, a notable 25% report considering leaving nursing altogether. Previously, 27% of respondents reported considering leaving nursing altogether.

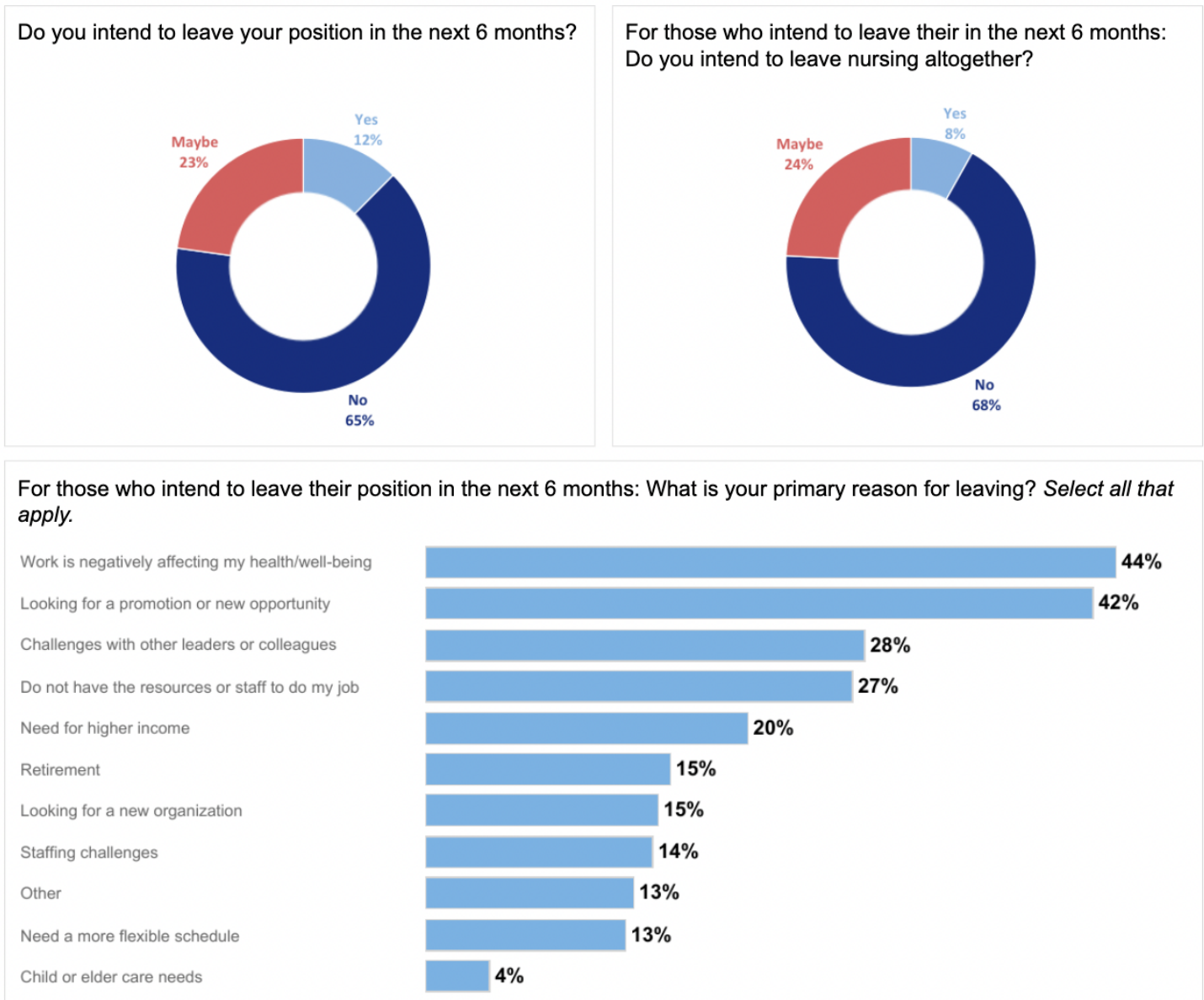


Figure 12 - Nurse leaders indicate intent to leave and reasons for leaving, November 2023

The top reasons nurse managers report leaving their roles are the negative impact of work on their health and well-being, the pursuit of a promotion or new opportunities, and challenges with other leaders or colleagues. Directors report they are opting to leave because they seek a promotion or new career opportunities, their health and well-being are negatively affected by work or they face resource inadequacies in their roles. According to CNOs/CNEs, their top reasons are work adversely affecting their health and well-being, challenges with peers or leaders, or the pursuit of a promotion or new opportunities.

SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE WORK SATISFACTION

When looking at work satisfaction, survey data indicates nurse leaders experience heightened work satisfaction when they are able to take days off when needed (57%), as well as having a healthy work-life balance (48%). Nurse leaders also report increased work satisfaction when their organization provides professional development opportunities (45%).

Nurse leaders also report that their organization encouraging transparent communications (35%) and increasing salary and compensation (34%) significantly impact their work satisfaction. Additionally, organizations have improved work satisfaction through professional governance councils (28%), flex scheduling (28%), eliminating unnecessary meetings (22%) and increasing administrative support (20%).

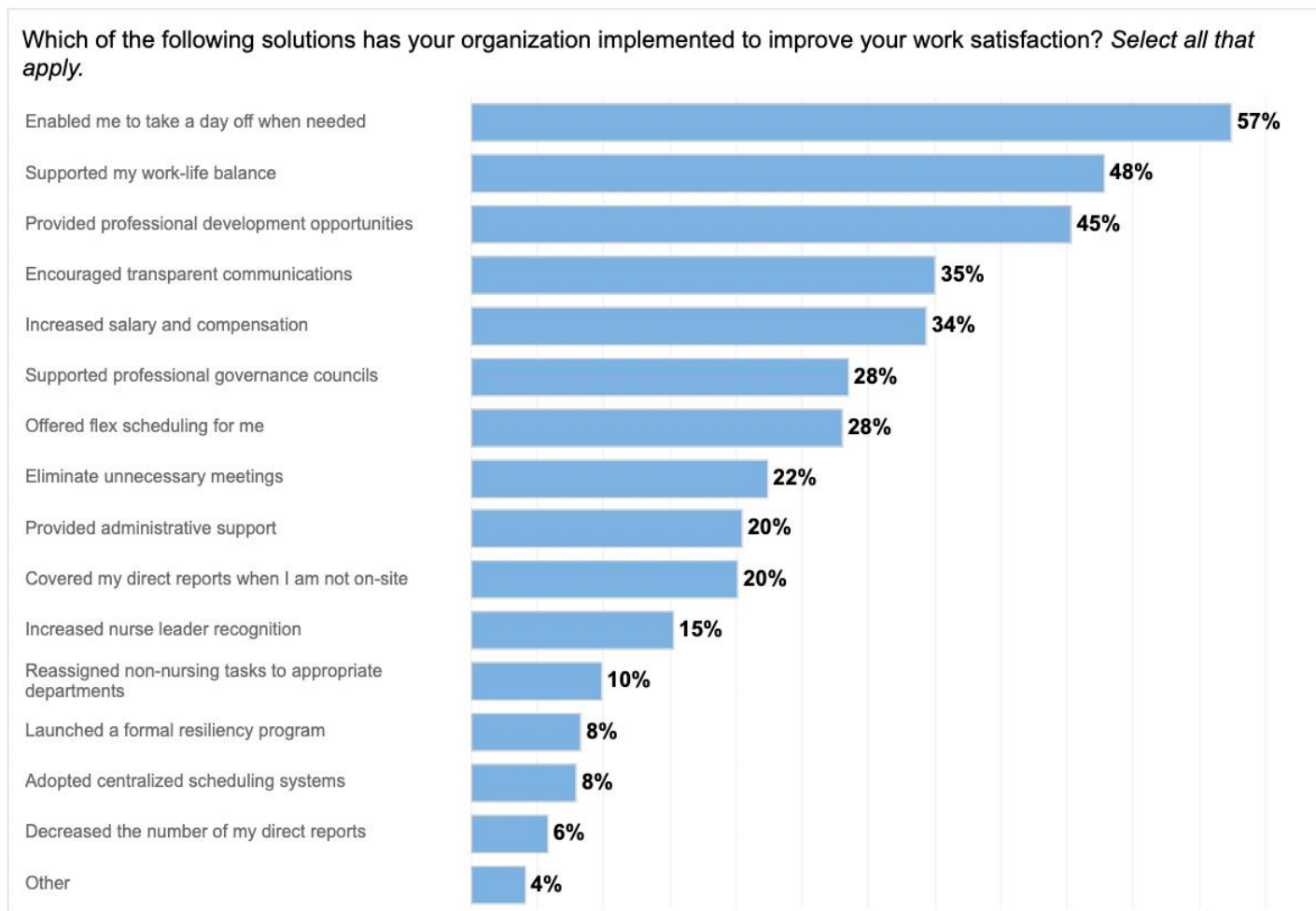


Figure 13 - Nurse leaders indicate solutions to improve their work satisfaction, November 2023

RETENTION TIPS

Apart from facilitating necessary time off, fostering a work-life balance and offering professional growth avenues, organizations can target specific solutions holding statistical significance based on roles. CNOs/CNEs reportedly exhibit less emphasis on flexible scheduling and a greater emphasis on eliminating redundant meetings and receiving administrative support. While directors and managers prioritize covering direct reports during their absence while off-site. Concentrating on these areas, tailored to individual roles, is poised to enhance the overall job satisfaction of nurse leaders.

PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

Since the first survey in 2020, the AONL Foundation asked nurse leaders five Survey of Perceived Organizational Support questions to gauge employees' perceptions of the support they receive from their organization. The SPOS assesses how valued respondents feel by measuring their perspectives on their organization's care for their well-being, acknowledgment of their contributions and responsiveness to their concerns. This survey employs a Likert scale to capture employee perceptions, aiming to better understand how organizations can foster a sense of support, value and appreciation within the workplace.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

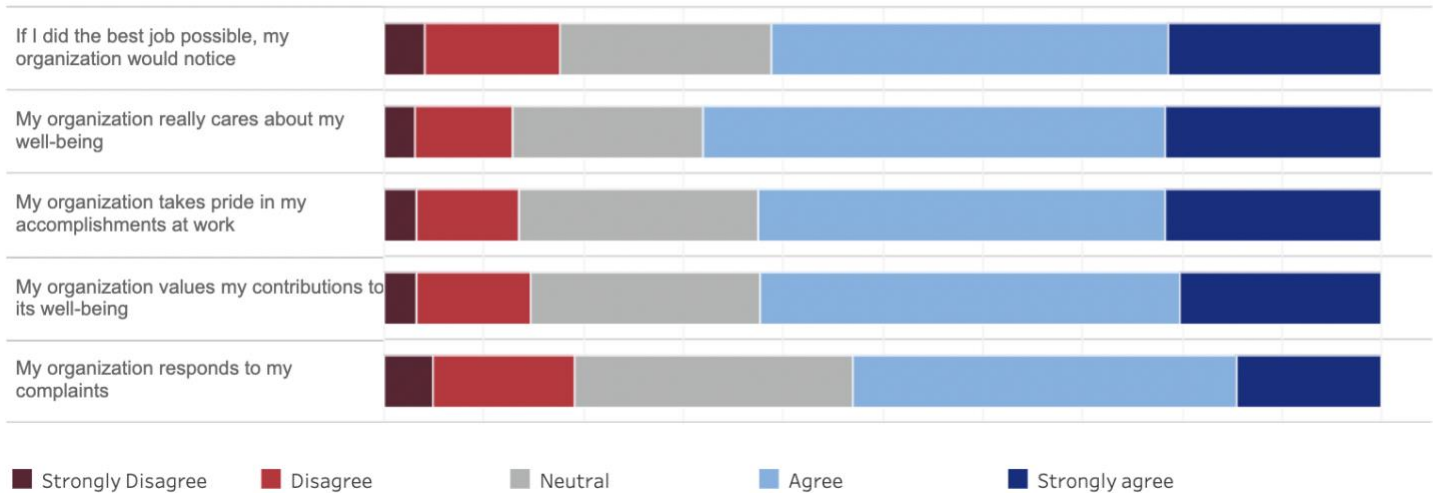


Figure 7 - Nurse leaders respond to five Survey of Perceived Organizational Support questions, November 2023

Figure 7 displays the scores from November 2023. The trends described use a numeric scale of 1-5 for Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Compared to last year, scores in 2023 are consistent or slightly improved.

- 1. Noticing Job Performance:** Nurse leaders who perceive their organization would notice their best efforts saw a mild 2% increase from 3.51 in 2022 to 3.58 in 2023, signaling a slight uptick in their confidence regarding recognition for exceptional work.
- 2. Caring About Well-being:** There is a slight positive shift of 3% from 3.63 in 2022 to 3.74 in 2023, showcasing a small improvement in nurse leaders' perception of their organization's care for their well-being.
- 3. Pride in Accomplishments:** There was a marginal enhancement of 2% in the perception of organizational pride in accomplishments, with a score of 3.61 in 2022 rising slightly to 3.69 in 2023, reflecting a modestly improved sense of organizational pride in nurse leaders' achievements.
- 4. Valuing Contributions:** The perception of the organization valuing nurse leaders' contributions remained relatively steady, maintaining a score of 3.59 in 2022 and rising marginally by 1% to 3.62 in 2023, suggesting a consistent level of recognition for their contributions.
- 5. Handling Complaints:** Nurse leaders' belief in their organization's responsiveness to complaints exhibited a small increase of 3% from 3.42 in 2022 to 3.48 in 2023, indicating a slightly improved perception of the organization's responsiveness to their concerns.

Overall, while the changes are subtle, 2023 data show a trend of stability or slight improvement in nurse leaders' perceptions of their organization's support and recognition of their contributions and well-being.

CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE OF NURSING (QUALITATIVE)

At the end of this year's Longitudinal Nursing Leadership Insight survey, respondents were asked an open-ended, question to share their concern(s) for the future of nursing, if any. The main themes from their responses show key concerns within the nursing profession, from staffing shortages and technology to legislative matters and organizational culture. The complete verbatim responses can be found in the data visualization displayed on [AONL's website](#).

Here are the main themes expressed by respondents:

- 1. Staffing Shortages and Retention:** Consistent worries about staffing shortages, retaining experienced nurses and attracting new individuals to the profession. Expressed concerns include workload, burnout, loss of experienced nurses due to various factors, including workload, lack of support and evolving career preferences.
- 2. Quality of Patient Care:** Concerns about patient safety and maintaining standards of care. The impact of staffing shortages on patient outcomes and the quality of care provided by overworked nurses.
- 3. Technology and Administrative Burden:** Discussions about the integration of technology, documentation burdens, administrative tasks and their impact on nurses' ability to provide direct patient care.
- 4. Leadership and Support:** Issues related to leadership, both at the managerial and executive levels, including need to support front-line nurses, understand or prioritize nursing needs by top-level executives and concerns about bullying or addressing incivility.
- 5. Workforce Changes and Generational Differences:** Recognition of the evolving workforce with differing work ethics, values and expectations across different generations. Concerns about the younger generation's priorities, inclinations toward leadership roles and their impact on the profession.
- 6. Financial and Legislative Concerns:** Worries about financial constraints impacting nursing, including issues related to compensation, funding, reimbursement and need for legislative support to address staffing shortages.
- 7. Training and Education:** Concerns about the adequacy of nursing education programs in preparing new graduates for real-world scenarios, as well as the need for ongoing professional development and training opportunities.
- 8. Health Care Environment and Culture:** Discussions about the changing health care landscape, challenges in delivering patient-centered care, workplace violence, mental health concerns among nurses and the need for a shift in organizational culture to support patients and nursing staff.

These themes highlight the multifaceted concerns leaders have for the nursing profession, encompassing issues ranging from workforce shortages to administrative burdens and the evolving health care landscape.

CONCLUSION

The November 2023 Longitudinal Nursing Leadership Insight Study reveals a nuanced landscape for nurse leaders, tracking shifts in their challenges and perceptions since July 2020. While issues with PPE have all but vanished since the pandemic, concerns are pivoting strongly toward staff well-being, retention, financial resources and workplace violence. Nurse leaders, primarily from urban acute care settings, grapple with multifaceted challenges demanding strategic agility and resilience.

Key challenges identified in the survey include staffing retention, financial resource availability and workplace violence. These challenges intersect with technological advancements and societal justice issues. Nurse leaders face the intricate task of balancing financial sustainability with staff well-being amidst evolving care standards and broader workplace culture challenges. Additionally, concerns prevail about workplace violence, health equity, social determinants of health and nurturing a supportive environment.

This study highlights the need for interdisciplinary collaboration, a team-based approach to models of care and innovative patient care solutions. Additionally, the study highlights solutions for improving the staffing challenges facing most health care organizations, including listening and responding to nurse feedback, allowing days off when necessary, increasing nurse recognition and offering flex scheduling. Furthermore, to enhance work satisfaction among nurse leaders, this study emphasizes the importance of flexible policies, professional growth opportunities, transparent communication and compensation.

Despite improvements in emotional health trends and nurse leaders' intent to stay since the 2022 survey, concerns persist around retention and recruitment, quality of patient care, technology integration and leadership support. This report underscores the urgency for tailored solutions addressing these concerns, promoting a supportive work environment and nurturing a pathway for future nurses. At the same time, the study highlights the need to focus on organizational cultural issues, including the development of new nurses, as seen in the open-ended answers, as well as societal issues, such as health equity and social determinants of health.

In conclusion, while certain issues have shown improvement over the course of this survey series beginning during the pandemic in July 2020, nurse leaders continue to face complex challenges. Addressing work-life balance, navigating staffing shortages and innovating models of care remain pivotal. This requires a blend of strategic interventions, policy support and inclusive organizational cultures to strengthen nursing's future and, ultimately, improve the equitable delivery of quality patient care.