

Guiding Growth at the Bedside: Evolution of the UMMS Nursing Roadmap

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Nurses enter the profession knowing that lifelong learning is not optional — it is essential. Nurses are expected to stay current with best practices, evolving care standards, and professional requirements, all while managing the daily realities of patient care.

Today's postpandemic nursing workforce places even greater emphasis on growth, meaning and organizational investment in professional development. Nurses are more likely to participate in ongoing education when they feel supported by their leaders and the organization (Mlambo et al., 2021).

Health systems therefore play a critical role in creating accessible, meaningful and sustained development opportunities for nurses across their careers. Organizations must design structures that make lifelong learning not only possible but expected. (Mau & Krivanek, 2025)

Recognizing the changing needs of the nursing workforce, the University of Maryland Medical System (UMMS) — an 11-hospital, 2,400-bed health system — developed a standardized Nursing Roadmap to support clinical nurses at every stage of their professional journey.

The UMMS Nursing Roadmap

Originally created in 2018 by two nurse managers at the University of Maryland Medical Center, the Nursing Roadmap established a five-phase developmental framework outlining how nurses advance from orientation through experienced practice and into leadership roles. The roadmap outlines a staged progression of professional development aligned with the organization's professional advancement model. Each phase identifies suggested milestones and competencies that support progressive professional growth. Phase 1 focuses on milestones and competencies supporting the nurse's initial transition into practice. Phase 2 highlights engagement in unit-based activities and participation in professional organizations. Phase 3 encourages contributions to unit practice improvement and consideration of advancement within the clinical ladder. Phase 4 promotes sustained involvement in professional activities, quality initiatives, mentorship and unit-level leadership. Phase 5 supports broader leadership, mentorship and contributions to the organization as a whole.

In 2022, the model was rebranded as the UMMS Nursing Roadmap and implemented across all UMMS hospitals. Nursing leaders are expected to introduce the roadmap at a nurse's hiring, review it annually and track utilization through a web-based dashboard. The long-term system goal is 100% engagement with the Nursing Roadmap among clinical nurses.

To streamline the process, leaders receive monthly automated email reminders to review and update roadmap statuses. Dashboards provide real-time visibility across the system, enabling comparison, identifying high-performing units and supporting the dissemination of best practices. This transparency strengthens alignment between individual career goals and organizational priorities, while supporting retention and engagement.

Despite progress, UMMS continues to face elevated clinical nurse turnover, with a first-year turnover rate of 30.1% over the past 12 months. These challenges reflect national trends and reinforce the importance of providing nurses with clear, structured developmental pathways. Without consistent use of tools like the Nursing Roadmap, nurses may experience variability in expectations, support and opportunities for advancement.

The Nursing Roadmap is designed to counteract these inconsistencies by creating a standardized, equitable and actionable structure for growth. Successful implementation depends on consistent leadership engagement and accountability across all member organizations.

Bringing the roadmap to life

A tool only makes a difference when it is used consistently — and this is where nurse managers play a pivotal role.

The Nursing Roadmap is a powerful recruitment tool because it makes advancement pathways transparent from the outset. During interviews, nurse managers use it to demonstrate how nurses can progress on the UMMS clinical ladder from Clinical Nurse I through Senior Clinical Nurse II, and how the system supports transitions into roles such as educator, manager, infection preventionist or clinical specialist. The Nursing Roadmap offers a menu of professional development activities that can be tailored for the individual clinical nurse's interests and professional goals. This clarity helps candidates visualize long-term growth within UMMS.

Once hired, the roadmap is reviewed at key intervals: on the first day, at 30 days, throughout the initial review period, and again at the annual evaluation for new nurses. Experienced nurses update the Nursing Roadmap every six months. These structured touchpoints ensure that every nurse has a clear set of goals and an action plan, reinforcing that professional development is both expected and supported.

The roadmap also strengthens shared leadership by integrating the roles of nurse managers and senior clinical nurses (SCNs). SCNs, who serve as part of the unit's final leadership group, use the roadmap as a coaching and mentoring tool within their assigned groups. Their guidance helps bedside nurses interpret the checklist, understand advancement criteria, and identify the skills and experiences needed to move forward. This transparency empowers nurses to take ownership of their professional growth, reduces ambiguity around promotion, and fosters a culture where advancement is visible and achievable.

When used consistently, the Nursing Roadmap becomes a cultural foundation for growth — not just a checklist. The roadmap creates a structured and transparent pathway that strengthens communication and engagement between new hires and nurse managers, ensuring that expectations and goals are clear from the very beginning. When leaders take an active role — explaining the growth trajectory, checking in regularly and dedicating meaningful time to the process — they build trust and a sense of partnership that demonstrates genuine organizational commitment to each nurse's success. This shared approach supports the new team member's development while also fostering pride and motivation as milestones are reached, reinforcing a culture where growth is intentional, visible and celebrated.

Evaluation

Nursing Roadmap utilization across UMMS has shown meaningful engagement since its launch, with thousands of nurses actively using the tool each year. In its first full year of implementation fiscal year (FY) 2022, from July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023, 76% of clinical nurses (n = 3,559) were already engaged with the roadmap. By FY 2023, utilization rose dramatically to 95% (n = 4,424), and several hospitals even achieved full participation — a remarkable accomplishment for a system of this size and complexity. In FY 2024, engagement remained high at 87% (n = 4,246), demonstrating sustained system-wide commitment to structured professional development.

Achieving 95% utilization across an entire health system is exceptional, particularly for a tool that relies on consistent front-line leadership engagement. This strong performance highlights both the value nurses see in the roadmap and the dedication of nurse leaders to integrating it into daily practice.

A 2025 evaluation of nursing turnover resulted in four key recommendations: modernize the Nursing Roadmap to reflect contemporary practice; integrate the Nursing Roadmap into the existing electronic competency platform; standardize expectations for use across all hospitals and measure its impact on retention.

The evaluation findings confirm the Nursing Roadmap is both a leadership tool and a driver of professional growth. But to reach its full potential, it must be consistently applied, technologically streamlined and aligned across UMMS. When these pieces come together, the Nursing Roadmap can serve as a powerful mechanism for building engagement, strengthening clinical expertise and improving retention.

Next generation roadmap

In 2025, UMMS launched the Clinical Nurse Development Program (CNDP) — a strategic initiative designed to unify and modernize orientation and professional development across the system. As part of CNDP, UMMS developed the Nursing Competency Framework, which includes eight competency domains and five progressive levels of practice.

This new competency framework prompted a reimagining of the UMMS Nursing Roadmap. While competency ensures nurses practice safely and independently, professional development marks progression in leadership, responsibilities and contributions over time (Price & Reichert, 2017). To create alignment, UMMS identified universal professional milestones — such as precepting, serving as charge nurse and participating in improvement projects — and mapped them to both the competency framework and the clinical ladder.

The revised Nursing Roadmap is designed as a longitudinal guide that spans a nurse's career at the bedside. Integration into the electronic competency platform ensures accessibility, eliminates multiple platforms and supports consistent implementation.

Implications for nurse leaders

Taken collectively, the evaluation findings and leadership perspectives reaffirm the importance of having a unified professional development structure. Modernizing the Nursing Roadmap, integrating it with the competency platform and establishing standardized expectations for use will strengthen consistency across UMMS.

For the Nursing Roadmap to deliver on its potential, nurse leaders must introduce it early, revisit it consistently and partner with SCNs to provide ongoing coaching. When embedded into everyday leadership practice, the Nursing Roadmap becomes a tool for performance management, engagement, equity and retention. ♦

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