THE AGING WORKFORCE IN HEALTH CARE: CHALLENGES AHEAD

WE'RE ALL GETTING OLD
The U. S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2050 nearly 20 million workers or about 20% of the national workforce will be 65 or older. That represents an increase of 75% while the number of workers ages 25 to 54 is predicted to grow by only 2%. The health care workforce is already older than most. By 2020, nearly half of all registered nurses will reach traditional retirement age of 65. Currently, the average age of a nurse in the United States is 50. Nearly one-quarter of physicians in a 2007 nationwide survey were 60 years or older. In light of these predictions, the U.S. Department of Labor commissioned an Issue Brief that is intended to address the challenges that lie ahead in the health care industry’s aging workforce.

ISSUE BRIEF ON THE AGING HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE
The March 2013 Issue Brief “The Aging Workforce: Challenges for the Health Care Industry Workforce” was published by the National Technical Assistance and Research Center and was co-authored by Laurie Harrington and Maria Heidkamp. Their Issue Brief contains compelling statistical information that should serve as a wake-up call for health care leaders. For example, one statistical table suggests that by 2030 the total number of health care providers will need to increase by over 3.5 million workers just to maintain the present provider-to-patient ratios that exist today. Filling that gap is crucial.

SOME CURRENT STRATEGIES
Many health care systems are already taking steps to confront the problems that will occur as the health care workforce matures. Some of these strategies have included offering:

- Weekend-only work, work-at-home opportunities and seasonal work that allows employees to take extended leave;
- Flexible schedules as well as phased retirement and a seasonal months-off program for up to six months during a slow season for full and part-time employees;
- Reduced schedules for up to six months without losing benefits;
- Employees who are age 65 and older to work up to 24 hours per week and receive the same benefits they would get if fully retired;
- Employees with at least 10 years of service who are age 59½ or older to begin to draw on their pensions while still working part time;
- Older workers who retire the opportunity to return to the organization within five years without losing their benefits; and
- “Snowbird” nurses who live in a locale only for part of the year the opportunity to work for three, six or nine months at a time.

For employers generally, the authors suggest first conducting a demographic workforce assessment that identifies current and projected skill gaps. Additionally, they suggest peer mentoring and job shadowing so that younger workers might assist older workers on integrating new technologies while older workers could help train the younger workers. Many other strategies and practices that are worth considering are outlined in the Issue Brief.

THE BOTTOM LINE
The fact that the U.S. workforce is aging rapidly is inescapable. The fact that the health care workforce is older than most should not be overlooked or ignored. Health care employers should consider getting ahead of this aging curve before it’s too late.

If you have any questions, please contact Steve Lyman at slyman@hallrender.com or your regular Hall Render attorney.