

Let's Get Certified: *An Innovative National Campaign*

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During Nurses Week 2008, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Nursing Services (ONS) launched an innovative campaign to increase specialty certification for its nursing workforce that resulted in a one-of-a-kind national initiative. The initiative "Let's Get Certified," currently in its third year of implementation with Phase III of the campaign, has raised the awareness of the benefits of specialty certification among the VA nursing staff. This movement has yielded a more highly educated and competent workforce,



improved nurse satisfaction, and promoted quality healthcare to veterans. In early 2008 the idea for the campaign was presented to the ONS Director of Workforce Development and resulted in a nursing work group representing the 45,000 VA nurses throughout the country who provided valuable input into the development of the initial campaign.

The purpose of the "Let's Get Certified" campaign was to recognize VA nurses for obtaining specialty certification. The program served as a catalyst for new and creative ideas initiated and led by VA nursing staff to develop a comprehensive program to promote, support, reward, and recognize specialty nursing certification. A national contest evolved in which two award categories were identified: the Certification Development Award and the Certification Achievement Award. The goal of the Certification Development Award was to increase the number of nurses with national specialty certification. Criteria for this award included the effectiveness of strategies used to increase certification.

The goal of the Certification Achievement Award was to achieve 25% or more of certified nurses within a facility. This award had three levels:

- Gold—25% or more of all nurses certified plus 25% or more of direct care nurses certified
- Silver level—25% or more of direct care nurses certified
- Bronze level—25% or more of all nurses certified

A toolkit was developed that included leadership talking points, information on specialty certifications, strategies for success, VA authorities on rewards and recognition, the VA-approved national certifications list, contest rules, the ONS awards, references, and most notably, discount coupons. The design on the front cover

Figure 1. Sample of a Certification Discount



illustrated VA nurses leading the way and highlighted a sample of some of the national nursing certifications that VA nurses might pursue. The toolkit was distributed to over 150 nurse executives at the National VA Nursing Leadership Meeting, and the slogan “Grow With Us” set in motion one of the largest certification campaigns in the nation.

BACKGROUND

An extensive literature review identified both the value of specialty nursing certification and outlined some of the barriers that impede nurses seeking certification. The American Board of Nursing Specialties¹ (ABNS) defines certification as the formal recognition of specialized knowledge, skills, and experience demonstrated by achievement of standards identified by a nursing specialty to promote optimal health outcomes and that specialty nursing certification is *the standard* by which the public recognizes quality nursing care. The ABNS membership identified cost of certification exams, lack of institutional rewards and recognition, and lack of institutional support as the top three barriers to certification.¹ Another study by the AACN Certification Corporation reported that certification barriers included such identifiers as: not enough time, fear of exam failure, and lack of relevance to practice.²

REMOVAL OF THE BARRIERS

A critical element in the success of the campaign was a result of aggressively addressing the identified barriers to certification. The American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) was the first certifying agency that decided to participate in the certification campaign. A discount coupon reflecting a “Change is Good” (Figure 1) theme was offered to VA nurses, and this has become a cornerstone to the success of the program. Nurses responded quickly to the offering, and a wave of excitement and certification flurry ensued. Removal of the cost for certification barrier resulted in a heightened interest in obtaining specialty certification. Soon, other certifying bodies expressed an interest and subsequently joined the campaign.

The publication of the toolkit addressed the barrier to awarding nurses for certification by outlining the VA Authorities and regulations from the VA Handbook 5017 related to Nurse Specialty Certification awards. The VA intranet site is <http://vaww1.va.gov/ohrm/Directives-Handbooks/Documents/5017.doc>. Cash awards up to \$2,000 in addition to the potential for a Special Advancement for Achievement award (SAA), which is a pay raise, were promoted, with individual facilities having the ability to identify the most meaningful reward for their area. Lastly, in an effort to remove the barrier of institutional recognition, the ONS offered a special nonmonetary recognition to the contest winners of Phase I, and in a last-minute decision, unexpectedly rewarded all facilities who entered the national contest with a cash participation award. Ironically, some facilities shared that they were disappointed they did not submit an application for the national award having assumed they wouldn’t be in the winning circle.

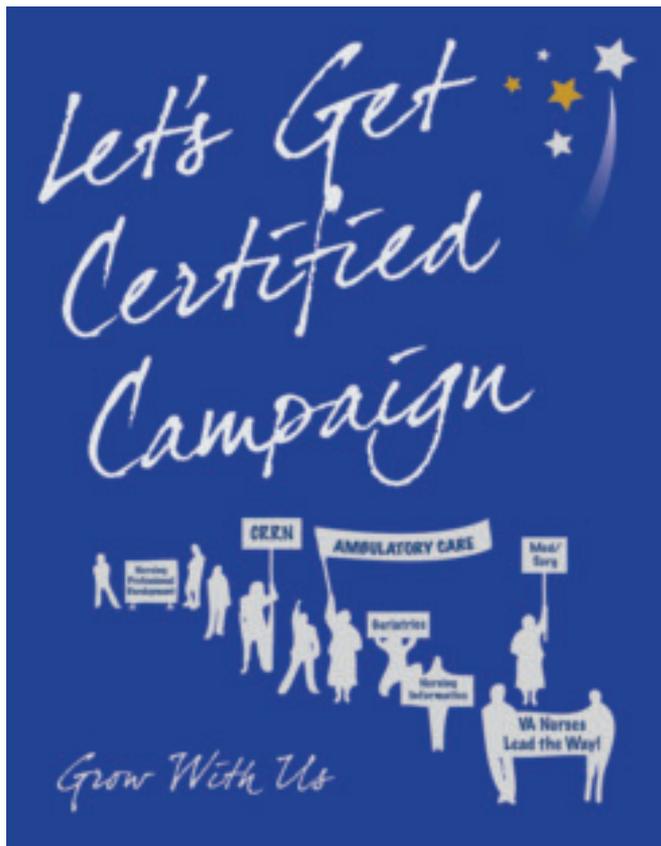
PHASE I

An analysis of the campaign was completed at the end of Phase I. Certifying bodies were asked to provide feedback and outcomes from the campaign. All of the certifying bodies participating in the campaign reported that there was a new interest in national certification. As an example, the American Association of Critical Care Nurses (AACN) identified that although the campaign was growing, data indicated that the success of the campaign would appear to have been locally driven. The AACN reported more than 130 new certifications during the first phase and highlighted those national programs such as the AACN Beacon Award for Critical Care Excellence and ANCC Magnet Recognition Program use certification as an indicator of nursing excellence. Additionally, the Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation (ONCC) reported increased calls to the center related to certification and a record-breaking number of new applicants. Other agencies reported similar findings. Additionally, there was a marked increase in internal field requests for additional new certifications to be added to the list of VA-approved certifications (Figure 2).

PHASE II

Although Phase I got off to a slow start, and participation in the national contest was less than expected, it was recognized that changes were needed in order to increase participation and the effectiveness of the campaign. The ONS supported Phase II (Figure 3) by providing a large cash award in addition to the nonmonetary incentive for the recipients of the Development and Achievement Award winners of the national contest. The “Let’s Get Certified” Grow With Us theme continued, and the VA expanded the campaign to include the Department of Defense (DoD). This seemed to be a very natural inclusion since so many of the polytrauma patients were active-duty military and recently discharged veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

Figure 2. Phase I National Campaign Tool Kit



This also represented the opportunity for a continuum of nursing excellence and quality care to those transitioning through the two federal healthcare systems. The marketing materials and toolkit were presented by the VHA chief nursing officer to the Federal Council of Nursing Chiefs (Army, Navy, Air Force, and US Public Health Commissioned Corps) in an effort to further promote nurse certification and enhance the DoD's ability to capitalize on the campaign promotions.

The toolkit was updated, and the newly designed marketing campaign began on June 1, 2009, and ended on May 31, 2010. Thirteen certifying agencies joined the initiative, and for the first time, a licensed practical nurse (LPN)-certifying body joined the campaign. The National Federation of Licensed Practical Nurses (NFLPN) became involved by offering LPN/licensed vocational nurses (LVNs) a certification examination discount. Certification was now visible on a national level for this cohort, and staff responded immediately to the incentive and reward program applicable for LPNs. The American Nurses Credentialing Center, the American Association of Critical Care Nurses, and the Wound, Ostomy, Continence Nurses also promoted the campaign in Medscape, Bold Faces, and through Web site advertising in an effort to increase nurse certification.

The VA facility participation rate for the national contest doubled from Phase I to Phase II; however, as of this writing, data from the participating certifying agencies have not yet been tabulated and reported.

Figure 3. Phase II National Campaign Tool Kit



PHASE III

The campaign is now in the beginning of the third phase of a 5-year pilot project to improve nurse certification within the VA. There are now 18 certifying agencies participating in the national campaign. The toolkit for the Phase III has been updated once again, and the campaign continues to gain in strength and numbers as the VHA moves forward with this initiative (Figure 4).

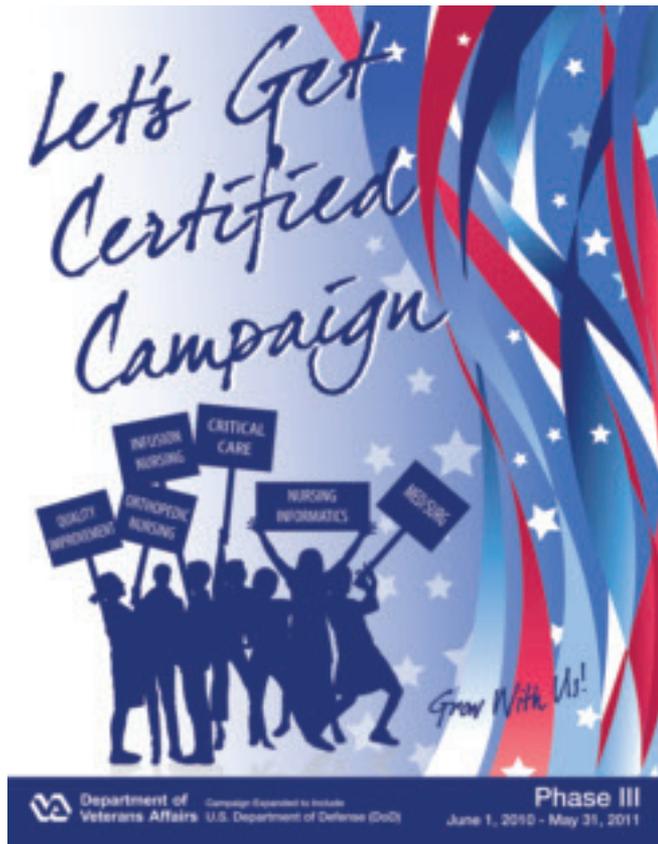
A CASE IN POINT

As a three-time designated Magnet organization, the James A. Haley VA Hospital (JAHVH) in Tampa, Florida, strives to continue its legacy of excellence in leadership through innovations, research, succession planning, and continued professional development of its nurses. Certification is highly valued and encouraged, not only by nursing leadership, but also by the staff. For staff, it is a validation of the knowledge and experience required to excel, and for management, it is an opportunity to lead by example. Through the "Let's Get Certified" campaign, nurses have become empowered to create new ideas and develop leadership skills. One new idea was the development of the James A. Haley's Grow With Us Poster (Figure 5).

EDUCATION IS KEY

The JAHVH embarked upon a new, creative way to energize staff while promoting the Phase II "Let's Get Certified" cam-

Figure 4. Phase III National Campaign Tool Kit

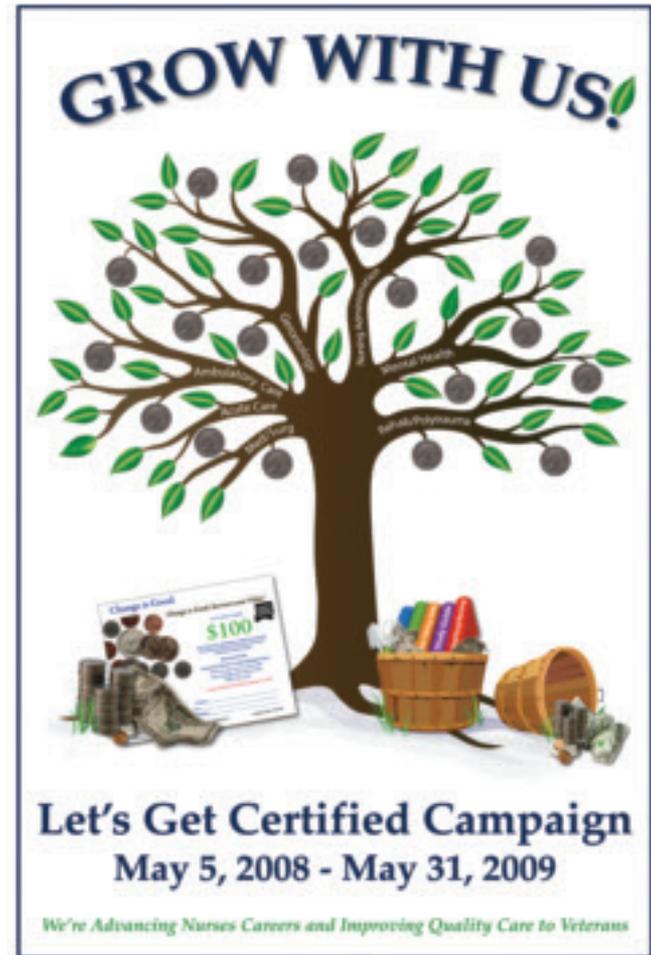


paign (Figure 6). The nurse educators—key to the initiative’s success—formed a cohesive team under the director of staff relations for nursing during Phase I and continued their mission to improve the number of specialty certifications in their respective areas during the second phase. Various unit campaigns evolved throughout the hospital. The educators encouraged study groups, planned educational programs, and mentored the staff throughout the hospital. Using the various incentives inherent in the campaign aided their promotional efforts.

The barriers to certification were addressed. One barrier, the cost of study materials and exam fees, can put a financial hardship on nurses who may have conflicting priorities. To alleviate this, the hospital bought many resource materials, including study guides, software, and consultants to assist in the education process. Internal support mechanisms were developed for nurses who expressed a “fear of failure and individual counsel,” and support was provided to nurses who wanted individual assistance. The mottos “You can do this” and “Don’t ever quit” were embraced. Nurses were encouraged to try and try again until success was achieved.

The staff was resilient and gained strength and support from educators and peers who provided them with sustained, positive reinforcement. To address the barrier of a lack of rewards and recognition, the hospital enhanced the rewards for certification. The first certification resulted in a \$1000 cash award, in addition to a SAA, a pay increase. A second certification resulted in an additional cash award of \$2000 (Figure 7).

Figure 5. JAHVH Phase I Let's Get Certified Campaign Poster



Additionally, the administrative review committee strongly believed that a reward should also be established if a nurse transitioned from one specialty to another, so another award was initiated for any nurse who moved from one specialty area to another, making it possible for a nurse to receive a maximum of three awards for certification over the lifetime of his or her career and further advancement within the system. The continuation of the very generous hospital rewards program was a driving force that also added to the campaign’s success.

The removal of known barriers to certification impacted the results of the internal initiative to improve nurse certification. By providing education and the resources aimed at enhancing competency, nurses became more confident and demonstrated a knowledge that simultaneously improves quality care to veterans and rewards nurses for their educational endeavors. In addition, the newly certified nurses delighted in adding new initials that designated their certification credentials.

As a result of the Phase II “Let’s Get Certified” campaign, the JAHVH Spinal Cord Injury Center nurse educator spearheaded the development of a new team of interdisciplinary professionals to enhance the education of rehabilitation staff. Her enthusiasm resulted in two newly designed review

Figure 6. JAHVH Phase II Grow With Us Poster For Nurse Educators



courses resulting in increased attendance, interest in certification, and improved passing rates. In response to staff interest in multiple sclerosis (MS), the nurse educators collaborated with the Employee Education System (EES) and the MS Center of Excellence in providing a 1-day review seminar to prepare nurses for this specialty examination.

The critical care unit became a model environment for staff development over the past year. Unit champions evolved during Phase II with an emphasis on improving critical care knowledge. This resulted in improved patient outcomes such as decreases in the ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP) rate, pressure ulcers, and central line infections. Additionally, increased unit certifications resulted in a new elite culture that increased the desire for education, enhanced pride in clinical expertise, and fostered a willingness to share new knowledge with peers. Nurses celebrated their accomplishments among their peers at a section unit award ceremony.

To kick the new year off, a “Let’s Get Certified” Day was held. Staff heard about the campaign, the discounts, and the numerous onsite education classes being offered. Various classes such as med/surg, psychiatric nursing, and gerontology were attended by over 120 nurses. Most notably, the nurse executive review course was overcrowded with managers who wanted to lead by example. Lastly, a nurse educator from the Community

Figure 7. Sample of the JAHVH Monetary Award for Nurse Certification



Living Center (VA nursing home care) encouraged LPNs to join in the certification campaign. This resulted in an almost 50% increase in certification in this group.

To celebrate these accomplishments, a Second Annual “Certified Nurses Day” Luncheon was held in honor of all certified nurses. In addition, during Nurses Week, a presentation called “Keep Up the Pace” was enjoyed by staff. The Phase II campaign resulted in a total of 50.45% of RNs and 22.05% of LPNs certified, of whom 46.56% were direct care nurses. The overall certification rate for 2010 is now 44.51%.

Through the promotion of education for certification, a new culture evolved. Nurses recognized the value of certification in changing practice and were more willing to share innovations and evidence-based practice in affecting patient outcomes and improving quality care to veterans. The JAHVH outcomes support the published research related to nurse certification. Clearly, removing the known barriers to certification impacted the results of the internal initiative to improve nurse certification. By improving competency, nurses naturally become more confident and can demonstrate a knowledge base that improves care and rewards them for their endeavors.

The JAHVH received the national Gold Achievement Award for the Phase II campaign. Additional winners included the New Jersey Healthcare System, Silver Achievement; Orlando Veterans Administration Medical Center, Bronze Achievement; and the Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, the Development Award. A summary of some of the best practices noted throughout the campaign included launching program kickoff events and marketing campaigns with the promotion of the discount coupons. Education was enhanced by the provision of onsite and local educational resources, partnering with other area VA hospitals to cosponsor courses and use existing nursing talent through mentoring and networking. Rewards and recognition were promoted through facility-based “Walls of Fame,” recognition luncheons, lifelong learner awards, and publications.

SPECIALTY CERTIFICATION

The value of specialty certification is well documented in the literature³⁻⁵, and a number of studies have examined the impact of certification on employment in the workplace.^{6,7} However, one surprising finding noted from an ABNS survey was that 25% of institutions did not provide either an incentive to promote certification or any type of reward for obtaining specialty certification.⁶ Certification is also used as an indicator of nursing excellence and ongoing education for national recognition, including the AACN Beacon Award for Critical Care Excellence, Magnet Recognition Program, and the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Organizational benefits include:

Enhanced Patient Care

- Certified nurses report more competence, accountability, and confidence in their practice than noncertified nurses, indicating that certified nurses may practice in a manner that is likely to improve patient outcomes.⁸
- Patients desire certified nurses, with 3 of 4 patients indicating that they are much more likely to select a hospital employing a high percentage of certified nurses.²

Improved Recruitment and Retention

- Nurses with certification report higher levels of empowerment and intention to stay in their current position.⁹
- High percentages of nurses with certification are found in organizations that attract and retain nurses, for example, 26.4% of nurses in Magnet hospitals are certified.¹⁰
- Certification represents attributes associated with organizations with high nurse attraction, satisfaction, and retention, including support for continuing education, opportunities for professional development, recognition, and working with competent colleagues.¹¹

SUMMARY

Nurse executives and administrators have an opportunity to lay the foundation for excellence in nursing practice by promoting and rewarding nurse certification. Certification plays a critical role in building a workforce of professional, experienced, and committed staff and organizations that truly support initiatives that make nurses feel respected, recognized, and rewarded and have the potential to emerge as a market leader in the delivery of quality healthcare.¹² This results in what can be identified as a win/win/win phenomenon! It's a win for the nurse, a win for the organization, and, most importantly, a win for the patient, adding credence to the promotion of evidence-based practice, the delivery of high-quality healthcare, and positive patient outcomes. **NL**

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