Retain Educated Workers and Registered Nurses Developing (REWARD) Experience Act
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The military health care system, like other health care systems across the country, is experiencing a severe nursing shortage that is threatening the ability of servicemembers and their family to receive timely and high-quality care. The Department of Defense (DoD) is finding it particularly difficult to hire and retain Registered Nurses (RNs), who serve a critical role in the military healthcare system. During the pandemic, RNs had the highest rates of shortages within the military health care system compared to other positions. Over 85 percent of DoD facilities reported nursing shortages during the pandemic and in January 2023, 80 percent of civilian vacancies in the Defense Health Agency were health care personnel positions. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that more than 275,000 additional nurses will be needed across the U.S. between 2020 to 2030.

The *Retain Educated Workers and Registered Nurses Developing (REWARD) Experience Act* would help the military health care system retain skilled nurses by providing a common-sense fix to an Office of Personnel Management (OPM) hiring requirement that right now has the unfortunate effect of incentivizing nurses to leave for the private sector after obtaining advanced degrees. Specifically, the legislation would empower hiring officials to waive experience requirements for the General Schedule (GS) pay scale for nurses who obtain higher levels of licensure while working in the military health care system, allowing them to receive recognition for their service and expertise gained in their previous position.

Current OPM hiring requirements mandate certain levels of qualifying experience in an equivalent position in order for a nurse to be hired at the GS level commensurate with the current level. For example, a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) may decide to go to nursing school while working. By the time they graduate from nursing school, they may have been promoted to a GS-7 position as an LPN. However, if they want to transition to RN position, they would only be qualified for a GS-5 position—and would effectively be taking a pay cut for more responsibility within a facility they are already well-equipped to support. If an LPN transitions to an RN position within the federal system, it would take them at least 3 years to even be eligible for a GS-11 position, whereas they would be eligible for a GS-11 position after one year working in the civilian health care market as an RN. This leads to many LPNs transferring to the civilian market, with very few of them returning to the military health care system after fulfilling their one-year requirement.

LPN Hiring Requirements for GS Levels		RN Hiring Requirements for GS Levels	
GS Level	Experience Required	GS Level	Experience Required
3	None	5	No experience
4	6-months	7	1-year as an RN
5	1-year	9	1-year as a GS-7 RN
6+	Promoted within federal system	11+	1-year as a GS-9 RN

The *REWARD Experience Act of 2023* would empower the Military Health System to retain skilled, dedicated nurses as they pursue higher education and more responsibility. Specifically, the legislation would:
- Provide the hiring manager within the DoD medical facility the authority to wave general schedule work experience standards for nursing positions if: the nurse is currently working within the DoD medical facility under a lower level of licensure; the nurse has achieved a higher nursing degree from an accredited nursing educational program; and they deem the nurse capable of safely and responsibly performing the duties of the higher position.
- Require verification from human resources that the candidate otherwise meets the qualifications of the position.

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