

Wexford health and MDOC lead the way in nurse certification.

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Recently, Mark Hale, president and CEO of Wexford Health Sources Inc., which contracts medical services to all of Mississippi's state-run corrections operations, pledged to certify Mississippi's health care staff. Plans for this initiative began early in 2008, when staff from Wexford, the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) and the American Correctional Association began discussions about administering the nurse and nurse manager certification exams to the Wexford nurses employed at three facilities across the state.

ACA's CCN and CCN/M programs offer nurses who work in corrections a unique opportunity to test their knowledge and skills in the specialty area of correctional nursing. Candidates qualify for the exam on the basis of their education and work experience. CCN candidates are line nurses in staff positions that do not require them to supervise other staff. They must be either a registered nurse, a licensed practical nurse or a licensed vocational nurse and have one year of correctional nursing experience in their current position. CCN/M candidates need to have an RN license in good standing with their state nursing board, and either an associate, bachelor's or master's degree in nursing or a three-year nursing diploma.

Wexford provided study materials for their candidates and gave them two to three months to prepare for the exam. The resource materials, as well as the exams, cover the following topics: conflict management, health care, legal issues, mental health, nursing practice, offender management/general information, security/environment, standards/accreditation and the American Nursing Association's Corrections Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice.

April Meggs, RN, CCN/M, director of nursing and site manager at South Mississippi Correctional Institution, explains how she prepared for the exam.

"I prepared for the ACA certification exam over a five-week period. I basically just read the books like I was reading a novel. First, I read the table of contents so I could cross reference the books. I would make a note in the table of contents i.e., Chapter 12 Correctional Law and Chapter 15 Nursing Protocol both deal with security. I would flip between books to keep the subject the same. The idea was to keep my mind focused on one subject at a time, while tying all the different aspects of correctional medicine together. While reading, I would highlight areas of interest. For two weeks, all spare time was dedicated to reading. Week three, I took the modules and tests. Since security was not directly in my scope, I took the tests and modules prior to reading the books related to

security. I then focused on the areas I missed. Week four, I began to focus on the sections relating to management. I also read the sections/books related to security. Week five, I reviewed all my highlighted sections, the tests and the modules.

"I feel that the security preparation was a great asset to the test. Although I read for preparation, I feel that I was most prepared for the management's test by relating to daily operations. I found the delegation chapter to be the most interesting and useful to apply to daily operations. As a manager, delegation can be both helpful and harmful if it is not understood by both the manager and the designee that the task has been assigned. I feel that I learned a lot from this experience. I feel that this experience has given me the opportunity to do my job great not just better!"

Diana Malloy, vice president of operations for Wexford states "Professional certification is an important component of clinical excellence. The ACA Nurse Certification program is in line with Wexford Health's vision of not only enhancing the professional capabilities of its nursing staff, but ensuring that we are providing optimal health care to our inmate population. In order to ensure that its nursing professionals are fully equipped with the knowledge to meet ever-increasing standards in the correctional health care field, we tasked a group of our Mississippi registered nurses and nurse managers to take on the ACA certified professional process."

During the last week in August, 2008, ACA sent a proctor to Mississippi to administer the exam. Sixteen nurses from the three state-run prison facilities passed the CCN and CCN/M examinations and joined the ranks of certified corrections professionals.

As Mark Hale said, "This is not a required exam by ACA; it is Wexford's pledge to strive for excellence in the correctional health care field. Wexford Health is the only correctional health care company to take on the challenge to certify their health care staff, beginning with Mississippi."

Malloy also states, "After becoming certified through ACA, our nursing staff feels an additional sense of achievement, pride and success both professionally and personally. Their accomplishment has raised the bar on excellence for our nursing professionals in each of our regions, and we continue to support and encourage this very valuable certification process."

From the viewpoint of the state agency, Suzanne Garbo Singletary, director of communications for MDOC, comments, "ACA certification of MDOC's contracted health care staff ensures an additional level of professionalism in the care of the state's offenders, and also provides a guarantee that those entrusted with the offenders' health care have the working knowledge required to meet ACA standards of care in correctional medicine. This reinforces MDOC's commitment to provide quality and timely health care to offenders."

ACA's certification program is based on research conducted by the National Institute of Corrections. NIC identified various skills and a base of knowledge that allowed individuals to work effectively in various categories (executive, manager, supervisor and officer) in a correctional environment. Resource materials were then found that covered the various skills and knowledge bases for each exam level.

Nurses face many challenges working in a correctional environment. In addition to universal precautions on their personal safety, they need to be aware of all the security policies and procedures to protect themselves, other staff and the inmates. They also need to be

knowledgeable about legal issues surrounding an inmate's right to health care, use of restraints, suicide prevention, etc. While some of these security and legal issues exist in hospital or nursing home settings, many are unique to the correctional environment and are not covered in nursing school curriculum. Therefore, this knowledge is often acquired on the job or by trial and error. The nurse certification exam measures candidates' knowledge base of what is the currently acceptable method of dealing with all the unique issues that arise in this challenging environment.

ACA congratulates and thanks Wexford and MDOC for moving this initiative forward. They have acknowledged the importance of certifying their nurses, ensuring they are recognized as corrections, as well as nursing, professionals. ACA also thanks Elizabeth Gondles, Ph.D., for her assistance in setting up and proctoring the Mississippi exams.

Peg O'Brien, MA, CCM, is manager of ACA's certification program. For more information on the program, contact O'Brien at pobrien@aca.org.

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