

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee.

My name is Helen Papeika. I am a resident of Shrewsbury, an RN of 35 years, a full time faculty within the Castleton University School of Nursing, and the chair of the BSN and MSN programs at Castleton.

Over the past couple of months, I have met with several groups of health care, nursing, education and political leaders within our state, and have been encouraged by the attention being provided to our nursing shortage and nursing education system within the state. These efforts are most appreciated, and I am eager to see what can be accomplished.

I would like to spend my time with you discussing Castleton University, and to provide you with my insights into how we might address our nursing problem.

- Castleton University has two nursing programs – an undergraduate BSN program, which is a traditional 4 year program that leads a student to eligibility to take the NCLEX licensure exam, and a master’s program that started in the Fall of 2021, created to educate clinical leaders and educators. Our BSN program operates in two locations – Castleton and Bennington.
- Our BSN program provides our communities with an entry level nurse with a strong liberal arts background, who is skilled to care for our sick and vulnerable. Castleton’s nursing program is celebrating it’s 60th year in 2022. We have a strong reputation of serving our community through our quality nursing education.
- Castleton graduates about 50 nurses per year, with the exact number sometimes approaching 60 and sometimes dipping into the high 40’s, as it has the past two years. Current enrollment trends project at least 50 for each of the next few years.
- While we can accommodate a small increase in enrollment with existing personnel and facilities, in order to produce more nurses for Vermont we have to address the following barriers:
  - o Let’s start with faculty – the pivotal element for the rest of my ideas. We have 2 full time faculty vacancies, and multiple clinical adjunct vacancies. It’s hard to hire nursing faculty because of pay. These well-qualified nurses may be attracted to education, but their qualifications are not being compensated anywhere near the market rates in clinical practice. Nurses who want to teach, do so while taking at least a 50% cut in salary from the clinical setting. Our 3 most recent qualified applicants were shocked at the salary being offered, and declined the interview process because of the salary. Even when faculty are recruited, the retention is difficult because of pay and overload. Over 50% of our current nursing faculty have been employed by Castleton University for less than 3 years. A nurse does not equal a nurse educator. The nurse educator is a unique individual who has the ability and experiences of our bedside nurses, but also has an advanced degree, and specialized skills to educate others. Our students are making more than we are, without having any experience. Our students are starting a new job with a \$10,000-15,000 sign on bonus. How can you help? Recognize and appreciate the unique and specialized role that a nurse educator fulfills. Salary is one way to show appreciation. Another is to establish a dedicated annual bonus for the retention of nursing faculty. Building our pool of qualified nursing instructors with advanced degrees and specialization in clinical education is also important....and we have a brand new, online, 24 month masters program that will fill this need. Let’s create a scholarship for practicing nurses to complete the Castleton MSN degree program.

o Nursing school is incredibly difficult. The academics are rigorous, the schedules are demanding, and the standards are high. Just as a nurse does not equal a nurse educator, a warm body does NOT equal a nurse or nursing student. As we seek to grow our nursing population, we must remember to also focus on quality of education, quality of faculty, and quality of the nurses we develop. How can you help? We need to increase our pipeline of QUALIFIED future nursing students. Provide resources to get us into the high schools, technical schools, and community colleges. Help us increase interest in nursing and other health care fields. Help us identify those students who will be successful in nursing school, and help us prepare them BEFORE their arrival to be a success through preparatory programs and experiences.

o We lose students because they lack the background skills and knowledge to succeed. We work hard to retain these students, but we have a shortage of faculty and all of our current faculty teach overloads constantly. How can you help? Allow funding support for advising and tutoring programs specific to the needs of nursing students.

o Tuition is an issue. Our in-state Vermont residents can pay less as an out-of-state student to attend a SUNY institution. Even within our own university, the nursing students pay a higher rate of tuition than non-nursing students. Last year, over 60% of our accepted nursing students never started. They withdrew from the program with affordability as one of the top reasons provided. Scholarships are of great benefit to our students, and our students received over \$1.2 million in aid last year. Thank you for that. But increasing the number of nurses is a long-term problem. How can you help? Provide directed nurse tuition subsidies that allow the VSC to reduce the advertised tuition rate for nursing.

o Clinical opportunities for hands-on learning are a challenge. In our rural state, the number of hospitals and healthcare facilities are limited....and those we have are often small in size with no access to specialized opportunities in OB, pediatrics, and mental health for example. How can you help? Simulation experiences have improved tremendously over recent years, and can be enriching for our students as an adjunct to their community-based placements. Help us purchase this expensive equipment, and build adequate lab space. Also, support the work with our Board of Nursing to re-evaluate how simulation experiences count.

o There are students who are looking for second careers and are turning to nursing. Many of these are coming with a previous BS degree and want to transition in a timely manner to a Castleton BSN degree. How can you help? Support the work needed to add a Castleton BS-to-BSN degree. This would take time/funding for curriculum development and additional faculty who are also willing to teach on a 12-month basis.

Let's start with recruiting and retaining the best nursing faculty possible...then let's work on everything else.

I thank you again for your time and attention, and for the tremendous work being done to support the nursing needs within the state of Vermont.