



September 7, 2021

Adam Meier, Director  
DPHHS  
111 N. Sanders St  
Helena, MT 59601

Dear Director Meier,

The Montana Nurses Association (MNA) and The Montana Federation of Public Employees (MFPE) represent nurses who serve in County Health Departments across Montana. These nurses are on the frontline caring for most in-need families and communities, whether they are seeing CPS (Child Protective Services) children, conducting home-visits for new moms in at-risk families, or treating communicable diseases, just to name a few of their job duties.

MNA and MFPE were pleased to read both the June 3, 2021, memo announcing ARPA COVID-19 Public Health Workforce Supplemental Funding and the announcement at the ARPA Commission meeting on August 26, 2021 that 23 million dollars will be directed toward Public Health.

In a recent meeting at the Cascade County Health Department in Great Falls, the registered nurses shared their love of public health and their struggles to continue this work due to low wages forcing them to work a second position at local healthcare facilities (Benefis and Great Falls Clinic) to supplement their wages. In just one department, communicable diseases, they are down at least four full time registered nurse (RN) positions and the exodus is based solely on wages. Bachelor-prepared RNs are starting at \$22.17 per hour and Associate degree RNs are starting at \$20.57 per hour. A new graduate RN working this critical public health role reported that she takes several on-call shifts at the local large hospital facility, making a substantial amount more, just to subsidize her work at the county health department. The registered nurses report loving their work and would like to dedicate their career to this work, however, at these wages, it is not sustainable to work "just one job", nor is it helpful in recruitment.

It would be productive and supportive to use some of the ARPA money to increase the hourly wage of these dedicated nurses working in public health departments across the state, with the plan to address these unsustainable wages in the 2023 session. If it is not possible to address their hourly wage, please consider providing a retention/recruitment bonus (which is allowable), perhaps similar to the administration's return-to-work bonuses. Several hospitals are considering and some have already implemented retention bonuses, but local public health departments cannot afford such bonuses. These public health departments are the social safety net to address health issues for many Montanans, and these employees, like others working in healthcare, are



stretched to capacity. Let's be creative and work together to find a way to invest in our existing public healthcare nurses to sustain and maintain the public healthcare workforce we already have and provide them a competitive wage.

Further, MNA receives recruitment correspondence soliciting RNs to work in traveler or permanent assignments. The most recent solicitation is from NSI Nursing Solution, Inc. This recruiter is seeking nurses for facilities in Houston, Indiana, Central Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Chicago. NSI Nursing Solutions, through the facilities that they represent, is offering incentives from \$35,000 to \$60,000 along with competitive compensation and benefit plans along with relocation assistance. This lucrative compensation benefits these nurses and their families, but Montana loses these valuable nurses and their families and the Montana health care system loses out.

We need to value and keep our nurses in Montana, whether they work in public health or the public or private health care systems. Please seriously consider this request, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic crisis. We look forward to hearing from you, and please don't hesitate to reach out with any clarifying questions you may have.

DocuSigned by:

*Vicky Byrd*

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Vicky Byrd, MSN, RN  
Chief Executive Officer  
Montana Nurses Association (MNA)  
[vicky@mtnurses.org](mailto:vicky@mtnurses.org)  
406-459-2915

DocuSigned by:

*Amanda Curtis*

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Amanda Curtis, President  
Montana Federation of Public Employees (MFPE)  
[acurtis@mfpe.org](mailto:acurtis@mfpe.org)  
406-442-4250