



# 2021 Trends in Nurse Staffing

***A national survey on the state  
of nurse staffing in 2021.***

# Foreword

In this survey, **Avant Healthcare Professionals 2021 Trends in Nurse Staffing Study**, we analyze the state of nurse staffing, the status of United States registered nurse job vacancies, the cost comparison of outsourcing labor, and how COVID-19 has affected bill rates, training of new nurses, and the overall well-being of RN staff. This study will compare data from 2019 and 2020 to explore a shift in staffing trends.

With the nursing shortage expected to increase in the years to come, many hospital leaders are determining what impact this will have on their staff. The increase is due to older nurses retiring, current RNs burning out, educational resources for new nurses decreasing, and the turnover rate increasing. The number of nurses leaving the workforce each year has grown steadily from 40,000 in 2010 to nearly 80,000 by 2020<sup>3</sup>.

Nurse recruitment and retention are top concerns facing healthcare executives and chief nursing officers. This study shows the strategies organizations have implemented to assist in recruiting RNs such as internal recruitment efforts, relying on new graduates, making adjustments to their overall pay packages, and utilizing staffing agencies.

Many hospitals were already struggling to meet the rising demand for healthcare professionals due to the aging population, the opioid crisis, lack of frontline workers, and now COVID-19.

The impact of COVID-19 on the healthcare staffing industry is far from over. By early December 2020, over 100,000 patients were hospitalized with COVID-19 in the United States. One of the key impacts of the pandemic has been the overwhelming stress that impeded hospitals as they struggled to have enough available staff and ICU beds.

This survey was sent to a list of hospital executives across the U.S. with the title of CEO, CNO, and HR executive. We received over 100 responses from a variety of settings, including critical access hospitals and state facilities.

The data and responses included in this survey provide insight into staffing trends and how hospitals plan to staff during the national nursing shortage. Healthcare executives and nurse leaders may use this information to understand their staffing options in 2021.

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# Executive summary

**Avant Healthcare Professionals conducted a national survey on 2021 nurse staffing trends. The following is a brief overview of the findings.**

Nurse vacancies remain high throughout the U.S. with most executives relying on new graduates, internal recruitment, and external advertising to fill the openings. While new graduates are the most popular option of recruitment for 2021, a study by ELSEVIER<sup>1</sup> reveals that an average of one in five nurses will leave their first job within 12 months.

More than half of the respondents indicated that medical-surgical and ER are the specialties where nurses are needed the most. Over 90% of respondents said they were currently using travel RNs, most of which are there to assist in the influx of COVID-19 patients from the last year.

COVID-19 had a significant impact on healthcare systems as the need for travel RNs increased and their rates doubled. A majority of respondents said they were spending between \$100-\$150 an hour for travel RNs.

Hospitals also had to increase staff pay and provide incentives to keep nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Healthcare systems also struggled with keeping RNs as some lost staff to higher-paying travel assignments.

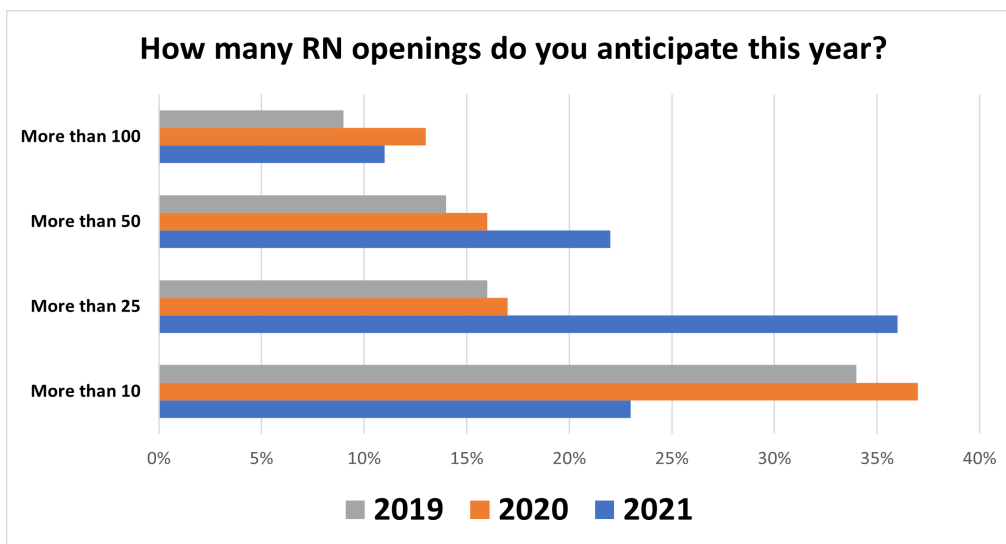
This study indicates the importance of finding more cost-effective ways to staff hospitals and how we can assist in the lingering effects of COVID-19 on healthcare systems.



# Addressing nurse staffing needs

Across the U.S. hospitals and healthcare facilities look to new graduates and internal recruitment to fill the increasingly high amount of registered nurse job vacancies.

According to the Avant Healthcare Professionals 2021 survey, 36% of respondents reported having more than 25 RN job openings compared to only 17% in 2020. Also, 21% reported they had more than 50, and 11% reported having more than 100 job vacancies.



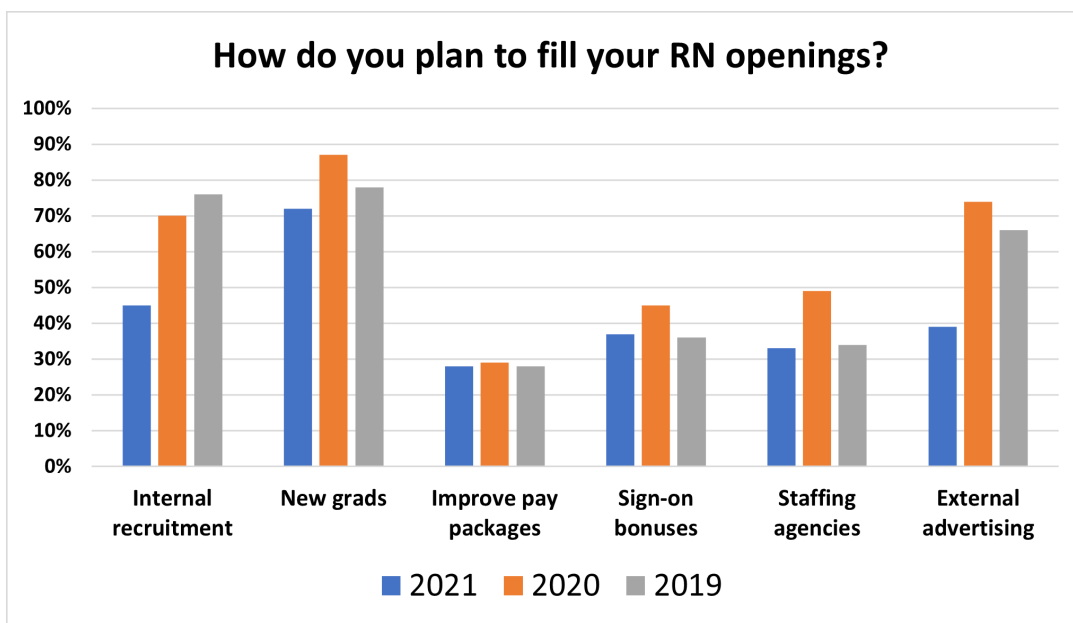
Compared to the 2019 data, RN job openings have had a large increase over the last two years. The increase in 2021 is greatly linked to the influx of COVID-19 patients across the country.



According to our survey, 71% of healthcare facilities will look to new graduates to fill their RN openings while 45% are looking to internal recruitment strategies.

Although hiring new graduates is a popular strategy used to fill nurse vacancies, healthcare facilities run the risk of losing RNs early in their contracts. On average, [one in five nurses<sup>1</sup>](#) leaves their first RN job within 12 months. This can cost hospitals up to \$7 million in losses annually.

According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing<sup>3</sup>, nursing school enrollment is not keeping pace with the projected demand of nurses and most schools lack the necessary number of faculty members to keep up with enrollment.

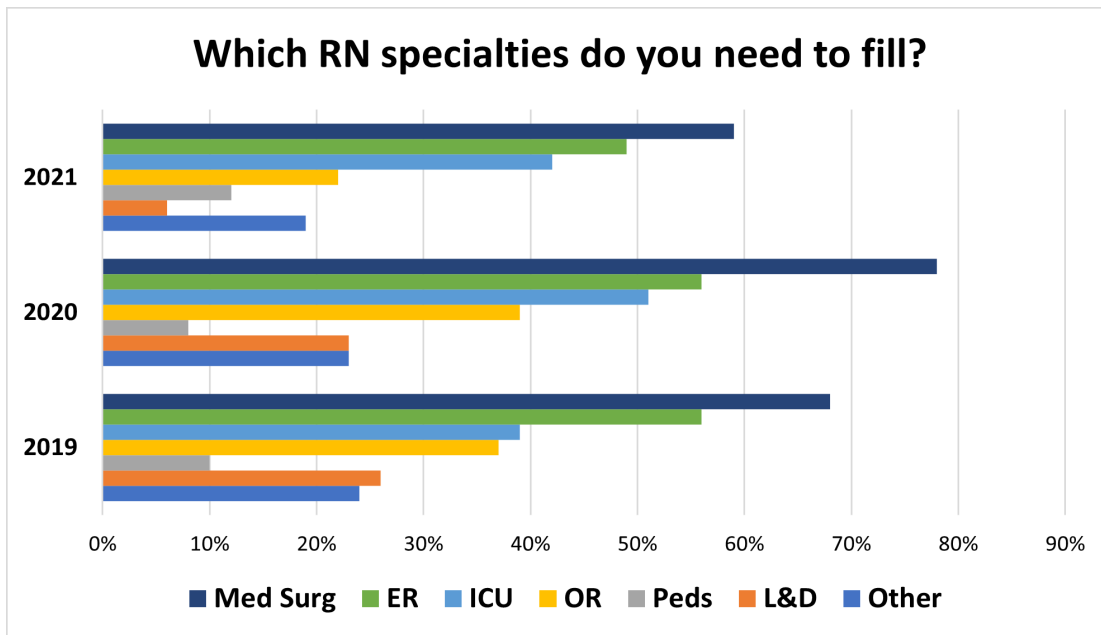


As many hospitals start to feel the full effect of the nursing shortage, many are now looking at monetary incentives to fill their RN openings. According to our survey, 28% of respondents said they will improve their pay packages while 37% said they are offering sign-on bonuses to RNs to fill their open positions.



# Demand by Specialty

According to the study, the highest-demand nurse specialties across the U.S. are medical-surgical, emergency room, intensive care unit, and operating room. Demand for nurses increased across the board in our study with 60% needing medical-surgical, 49% needing ER, and 42% in ICU. There was also a jump in pediatrics from 8% in 2020 to 13% in 2021. Comments from respondents indicated that there is a growing need for psych and behavioral health nurses captured in the “other” category.



According to our study, 81% of respondents believe that the volume of nursing school graduates will decrease as a result of COVID-19.

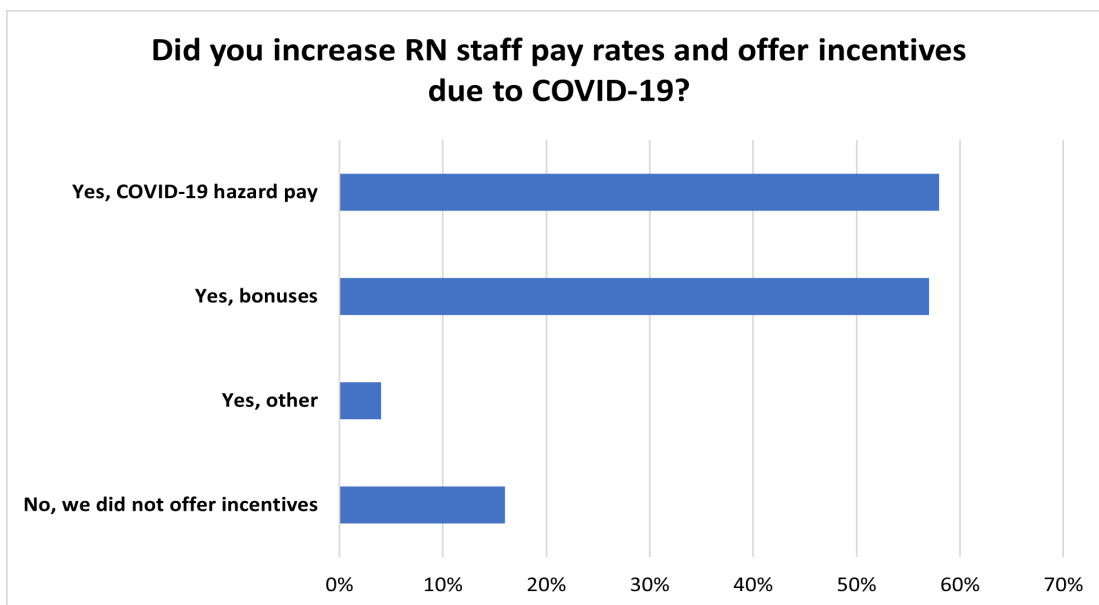


# Seeking cost-effective solutions

2021 projected average bill rates for RN travelers are expected to increase an average of 30% to 40% according to a [Staffing Industry Analyst Report<sup>7</sup>](#).

42% of respondents to our survey shared that they have more than 25 travel RNs currently while 12% said they have more than 50. March 2020<sup>2</sup> saw an unprecedented increase in demand for travel RNs relating to COVID-19.

Hospitals were not only paying double the rates for travel nurses but also increased RN staff pay and offered incentives to keep staff at their facility. 58% of respondents said they offered staff a COVID-hazard pay increase while 56% offered bonuses.

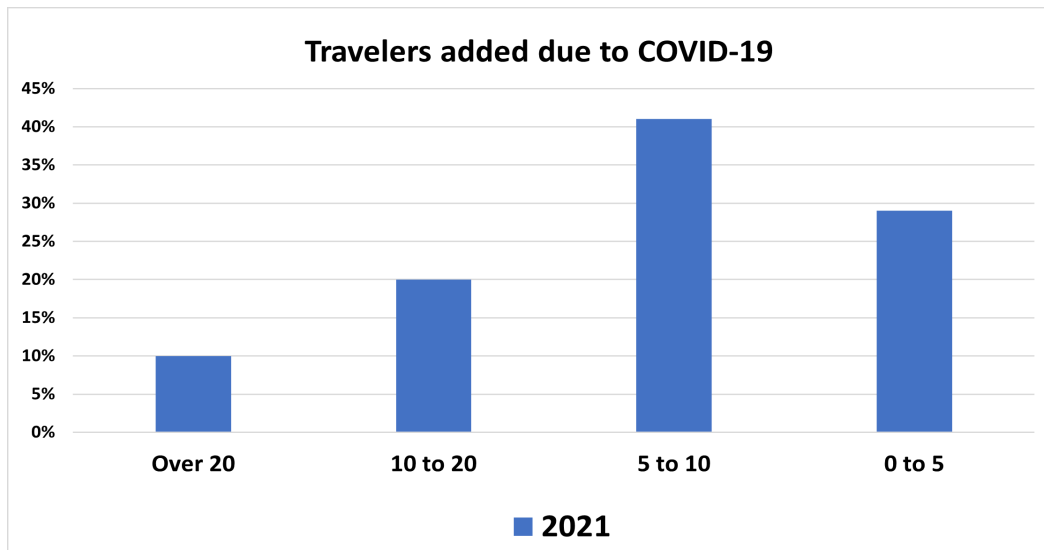


Healthcare leaders are now exploring more cost-effective ways to combat increases in staffing costs. Strategies such as tuition reimbursements, individuals seeking temp to perm work, and international nurses, to name a few.

International nurses are contracted for two-to-three-year assignments at a hospital at a reasonable rate. This allows for more stable staffing than the typical 13-week commitment of travel nurse contracts. A high percentage of international nurses then transition to full-time, permanent roles after their contract ends.

**“Costs for contract labor are not attainable, and national rates have greater impact on areas of the country where the cost of living and pay rates differ even more” - CNO from 2021 survey**

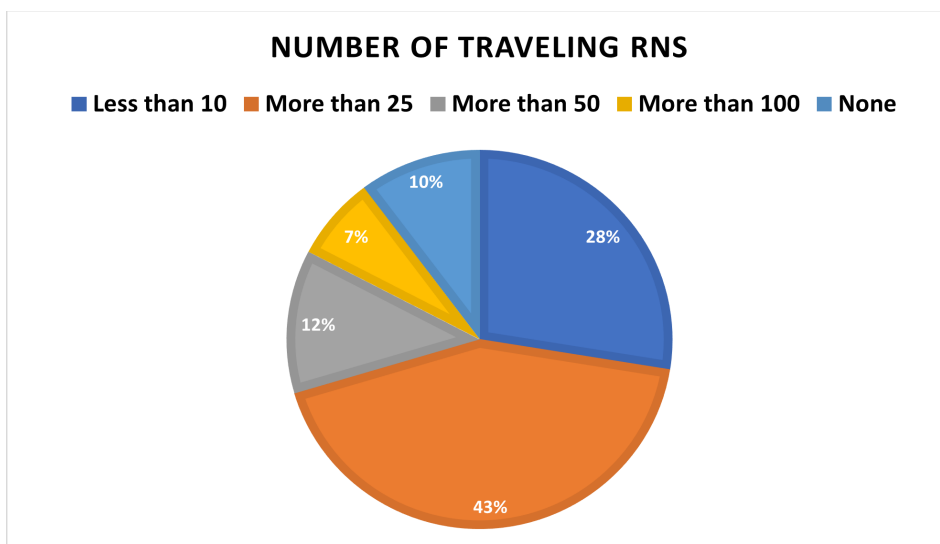




Due to COVID-19, 60% of respondents said they hired between 5-20 travel RNs specifically to assist with the pandemic while 11% said they added over 20. COVID-specific travel RN bill rates reached between \$100-\$150 an hour in 2021.

Many U.S. hospitals also had to halt operating room procedures to save capacity, supplies, and staff to treat the influx of COVID-19 patients. The suspension of procedures led hospitals to furlough OR staff for an extended period. According to our survey, 20% of respondents have not been able to bring back their OR RNs at 100% while 55% reported cross-training them in different departments.

Finding cost-effective solutions is a necessity as a growing number of nurses plan to leave patient care in the years to come, leaving new graduates unprepared for the realities of healthcare.

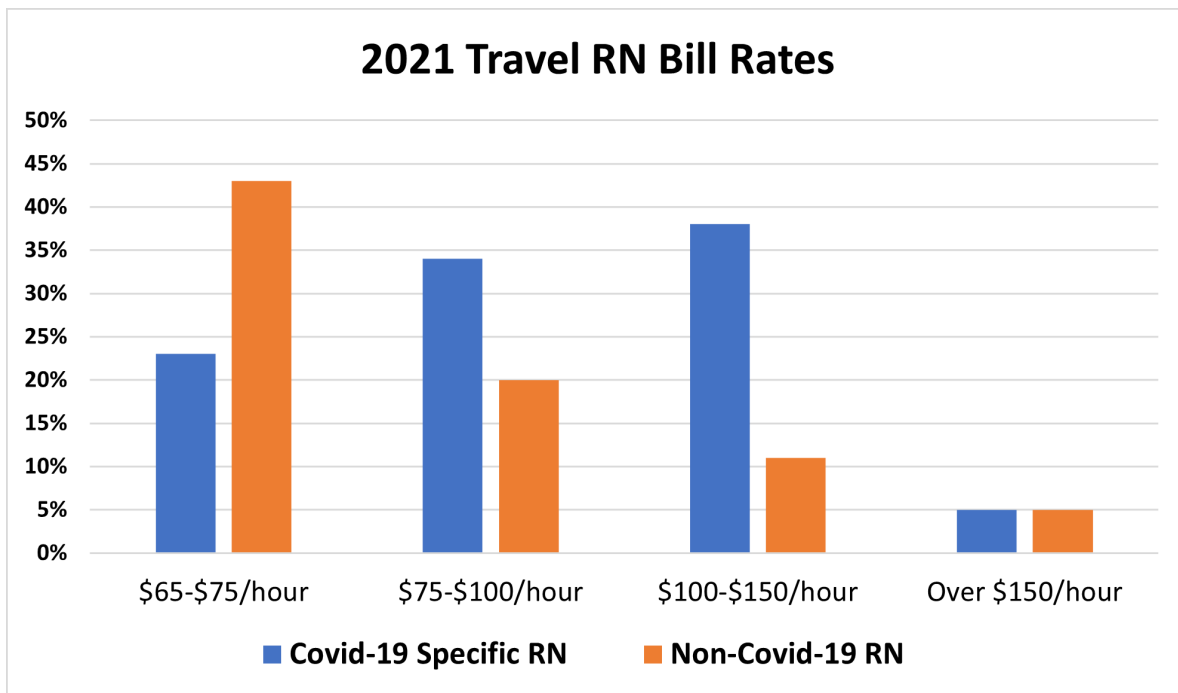


**According to our survey, 80% of respondents said they lost current RNs to other hospitals for travel assignments.**

# Special Report: Impact of COVID-19

Due to the effects of COVID-19 in 2020, we included a special section in our survey to reflect how the pandemic has impacted hospital staff and finances across the country.

COVID-19 has left a lasting impact on the healthcare industry, highlighting gaps in the healthcare workforce and hospitalizing over 150,000 individuals. According to our survey, 70% of respondents reported that they lost anywhere between 5%-30% of their staff due to COVID-19 while 49% of respondents said they lost 5%-15% of their staff to higher-paying travel assignments.

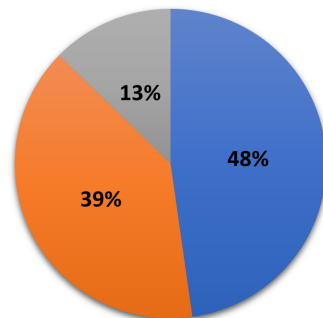


According to recent findings from the healthcare staffing platform NurseFly<sup>2</sup>, the average weekly pay for travel nurses has nearly doubled as the demand for nurses across the country increases to treat the COVID-19 outbreak. There was a [76% increase<sup>2</sup>](#) in average nurse pay nationwide since March 2020.

Our survey indicates 43% of respondents typically pay between \$65-\$75 an hour for non-COVID-19 travel RNs whereas 44% said they pay between \$100-\$150 an hour for COVID-19 specific travel RNs.

The International Council of Nurses estimates the global nurse shortage could increase to nearly **13 million<sup>4</sup>** following the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospital staff is concerned that extreme workloads, insufficient resourcing, and nurse burnout are causing them to quit.

**How has COVID-19 impacted the training & onboarding of your RNs?**



■ Increased Orientation Timeline ■ Patient Experience Opportunities ■ Other

COVID-19 had a major impact on the onboarding and clinical training nurse graduates typically receive. Due to the influx of patients at hospitals, training has been extremely limited. 70% of our respondents said COVID-19 has impacted their onboarding capabilities, while 63% of respondents said COVID-19 increased new graduates' orientation timeline.

Our “other” category in this question allowed respondents to share how their training capabilities were impacted. Some said nurses were coming in with less clinical experience, they had orientation online rather than in person, they had to rush the orientation process and some even had to cancel their RN nurse residency program.

According to our survey, 33% of our respondents believe COVID-19 will have a long-term impact on the health and well-being of their staff over the coming months. They also believe there will be a great loss of bedside nurses to other careers in the years to come.



## About the survey

Over 100 hospital executives and senior leaders across the United States participated in this survey. These participants included CEOs, CNOs, and HR executives from a variety of health systems, including critical access hospitals, state facilities, and larger health systems. The responses were collected in January and February of 2021 and included new questions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on healthcare systems across the country.

There is now more than ever, a sense of urgency to fill the gaps of the amount of experienced, tenured nurses who will retire in the coming years. Data shows that while 2 million new nurses will join the workforce, another 1 million will be lost. According to the [National Bureau of Economic Research](#)<sup>6</sup> there will be an estimated 7% drop in labor force participation and a 7% increase in individuals who are retiring. The Bureau of Labor Statistics<sup>3</sup> also projects there will be 175,900 openings for RNs each year through 2029 when nurses retire and a majority of the workforce exits.

The most significant drivers of the nursing shortage are the increase in patients, the high turnover specifically influenced by COVID-19, lack of training for new graduates, and nurse retirements. Over 50% of the facilities Avant Healthcare Professionals staff are in rural communities across the U.S. Avant Healthcare Professionals has been conducting this study annually since 2017 with the intent to provide hospital executives with vital information on nurse staffing trends through the perspective of their peers.

## About Avant Healthcare Professionals

Avant Healthcare Professionals is the premier staffing specialist for internationally educated registered nurses, physical therapists, and occupational therapists. Avant helps clients improve the continuity of their care, fill hard-to-find specialties, and increase patient satisfaction, revenue, and HCAHPS scores. Avant is a Joint Commission accredited staffing agency and founding member of the American Association of International Healthcare Recruitment (AAIHR). Avant Healthcare Professionals is a member of the Jackson Healthcare family of companies.



## Contact us



**Shari Dingle Costantini**

Founder and CEO, Avant Healthcare Professionals

[scostantini@avanthealthcare.com](mailto:scostantini@avanthealthcare.com)

407.681.1302



**Brian Hudson**

Senior Vice President, Avant Healthcare Professionals

[bhudson@avanthealthcare.com](mailto:bhudson@avanthealthcare.com)

407.478.0212

**Avant Healthcare Professionals**

1211 S.R. 436, Suite 227, Casselberry, FL 32707

Phone: 888.681.2999

Fax: 407.671.7615

[clients@avanthealthcare.com](mailto:clients@avanthealthcare.com)

[AvantHealthcare.com](http://AvantHealthcare.com)



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