



# Violence Against Healthcare Workers

BY JOSH HANNES, VICE PRESIDENT, WYOMING HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION



**I**n September 2022, a new report revealed that 5,217 nurses were assaulted on the job in this country in just three months in 2022.

These are staggering numbers and far exceed the experience of workers in any other profession.

This equates to more than two nurses assaulted every hour, 57 every day, and 1,739 every month. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show workers in healthcare and social services experience the highest rates of violence and are **5 times** as likely to be injured at work than workers overall. Rates of violence against healthcare workers have risen every year since 2011.

Right here in Wyoming, between January 1, 2021, and June 21, 2022, violence impacted 121 healthcare workers—with injuries extreme enough to result in workers' compensation claims. It is important to note these are only workers' compensation claims and not the total number of assaults on healthcare staff.

The total number of attacks is, without question, dramatically higher.

**While this commitment to service is what makes nurses and other healthcare providers heroes in their communities, it also makes them extremely vulnerable.**

The question of “how high” is difficult to pin down. Many times, attacks go unreported, and the reasons are varied. Healthcare workers are often, by nature and by training, helpers. They are in this field to care for people. They have been trained to treat the patient in front of them—even in the face of threats and physical violence. While this commitment

to service is what makes nurses and other healthcare providers heroes in their communities, it also makes them extremely vulnerable.

Further adding to the risk, they have no ability to pick and choose who they serve.

In a hospital setting, federal law requires all patients who walk through the door be treated. For example, a patient may enter the emergency room of a hospital on Monday and assault a nurse. This same patient could return to the same emergency room on Friday, and the hospital staff must treat that patient—regardless of the threat they pose.

State legislators across the country have decided they have an important role to play in addressing this violence.

Nebraska, Louisiana, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma have all passed laws which consider assault of a medical professional or provider a felony. The passage of such legislation makes a strong statement about how healthcare workers are valued, and how the abuse they suffer in the workplace is unacceptable.

There is precedent for this in Wyoming law: The state of Wyoming has enhanced penalties when it comes to corrections and detention officers. Federal law acknowledges attacks against flight attendants as a more serious crime than a “regular” assault.

Hospitals and other healthcare facilities are intended to be places of healing. The harm caused by attacks on healthcare professionals extends beyond the individual(s) assaulted. It interferes with the care of other patients, some who may require lifesaving measures. Interfering with the delivery of healthcare is a serious public safety issue, and Wyoming law should be updated to recognize this reality.

Healthcare providers, particularly nurses, have been leaving the profession at an alarming rate over the past several years. Burnout is one driver of this exodus, and Wyoming has suffered a lack of workforce more than most states. The market for recruiting healthcare professionals is a national one and Wyoming must compete in that market for nurses and other providers who are in high demand everywhere. It is critical for Wyoming to make itself as inviting as possible to attract and retain the best talent.

While states across the country continue to pass laws enhancing penalties for these crimes, Wyoming places itself at a further competitive disadvantage without addressing this growing issue.

Recognizing an attack against a healthcare worker as a more serious crime than a “regular” assault or battery and attaching felony penalties to those who perpetrate against healthcare workers is the right policy adjustment to protect healthcare workers, patients, and Wyoming’s essential workforce.

**It is critical for Wyoming to make itself as inviting as possible to attract and retain the best talent.**

There is no question, enhanced penalties are punitive. A felony conviction is no small matter and carries with it a

number of associated consequences. The jury is still out on whether such penalties prevent attacks. However, healthcare providers are talked about with the same esteem as law enforcement and firefighters. They provide essential services to our communities and save lives, just like the other professions against which an attack is deemed to be more egregious and deserving of enhanced penalties.

Since healthcare workers are far more likely to be assaulted at work than any other profession, and the consequences of a violent attack in a clinical setting are so great, why would state law not consider such offenses as deserving of enhanced penalties? The Wyoming Hospital Association, the Wyoming Medical Society, the Wyoming Nurses Association, and nurses from around Wyoming strongly support the adoption of these policy measures to protect the quality of care in Wyoming.

*This article was previously published online in Wyoming Hospital Association Weekly News Briefs, January 13, 2023.*

**WE SALUTE YOU  
AND SUPPORT YOU**

**Cigna is proud to support the Wyoming Medical Society and the incredible commitment of health care workers saving lives in the most difficult circumstances.**



**Together, all the way.®**

All Cigna products and services are provided exclusively by or through operating subsidiaries of Cigna Corporation, including Cigna Health and Life Insurance Company. The Cigna name, logo, and other Cigna marks are owned by Cigna Intellectual Property, Inc.

962816 04/22 ©2022 Cigna