

# Hiring and Retaining a Happy Camp Nurse

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**Abstract:** Having a camp nurse leave early in the season can be a disastrous experience if any camp. Building a more effective interviewing process, providing the candidate with realities about both the expectations and rewards of the position, and giving the nurse tools to prepare for the camp experience are positive approaches to start the season well. Knowing about the camper population, the typical day, and the kinds of issues that campers bring to the health center gives the nurse a background for determining if the description sounds appealing. The new nurse needs to feel welcomed and appreciated. Finally, because the unexpected can and does happen, the camp should have a contingency plan for if they unexpectedly need to recruit help.

The impetus for this article came after spending last summer minus a nurse--she left during the third week of camp. I have spent a lot of time since then thinking about how things could have been done differently. What could we (the camp directors and I) have done in the hiring process to make it more likely that the nurse would successfully complete the summer? Once hired, how could we have made it easier for her to acclimate to the camp nurse role? I have identified some ways that I think will be useful. I hope what I have learned will prove helpful and will prevent anyone else from having to be faced with this problem. Believe me, it is not a situation you want to be part of in the middle of the camp season.

It seems that each year there will be a nurse that goes off to camp excited about doing so and before the summer is over regrets the decision and vows to never do it again. In some cases, that nurse may not even make it through the summer and quits before the season is over. So why does this happen? Did this nurse expect the summer camp experience to be totally different? Did they expecting to pass out a few pills, put on a few Band-Aids and then sit in the sun the rest of the day? Was the nurse so overwhelmed either by the hours or lack of personal experience that quitting seemed like the only solution? Do these remarks sound familiar?

- "It wasn't what I expected."
- "I didn't know it would be this busy."
- "I didn't know I would be in the back woods."
- "I didn't realize I would need strong skills to be a camp nurse."

When you hear of situations like this you might be tempted to say that it was the nurse's fault. Why didn't the nurse ask the right questions? The nurse should have understood what the responsibilities were going to be and should have realized whether or not his/her past nursing experience would be sufficient to practice in a camp setting. But maybe it is the person who does the hiring who didn't ask the right questions or doesn't give enough information. So turn the all too familiar remarks into:

- "It was more interesting then I ever imagined."
- "It was busy, but everyone pitched in."
- "It was one of the most beautiful places I ever been."
- "I was able to practice a lot of my nursing skills."

## Conveying Adequate Information

Here are a few tips to help find a nurse who is qualified, enjoys the setting and might even want to return for another summer. When a nurse does inquire about a

position, their usual questions include length of contract, salary, nurse/camper ratio, camper population, and housing arrangements. These are very appropriate questions, but certainly not all the information that potential camp nurses need. Let's face it, camp nursing is far different from the traditional nursing roles and nurses don't know what questions need to be asked. It is the responsibility of the person doing the hiring to make sure the nurse makes an informed decision about whether or not to come to camp. Sharing the camp brochure in advance of the interview may help the nurse formulate questions. The following topics are important to discuss.

**Educational requirements:** Do you want a nurse with pediatric and/or emergency experience? How recent do you want that nursing experience to be? Do you require certifications in such things as CPR, First Aid, and/or wilderness training? If you routinely have campers with diabetes, asthma, and epilepsy, do they need additional training in these specialties? If your camp addresses special needs, you may have additional experience expectations.

**Length of contract:** Clearly state the start and end dates of contract. Explain the system for days off duty. Make sure they understand if there are certain days (such as check-in days) that are not negotiable for days off.

**Salary:** Clarify the amount of the salary, what it includes or does not include, and how often paychecks are issued. Does the salary include the cost of food, housing or laundry? Clarify your camp's position on whether staff children may go to camp at a reduced rate or even free. Some camps use volunteer nurses and it is important to clarify what goods or services will be available without charge and where costs may be incurred.

**Housing arrangements:** Are the quarters in the health center? Is the bedroom private but the bathroom is shared? Are the sleeping quarters shared with non-medical staff or families of other nurses? Conversely, make it clear if there aren't accommodations available for nurses with spouses and/or children who won't be in the camp program.

**Health center staffing:** What is the nurse/camper ratio? Discuss the staffing of the health center to clarify the members of the health center staff and describe their roles. Maybe you have a physician on site. If this is the case make sure the nurse is aware of this and, if not, what the physician back-up resources are and how they are used.

**Access to medical care:** Convey the distance from camp to the physician's office and/or hospital: Some nurses might not be comfortable if they are more than 20 minutes from secondary care. What is the Emergency Response System and how long does it take for EMS to arrive at camp?

**Caseload:** Provide the candidate with a sense of the volume that is expected. Share statistics from the previous summer: What is the average number of daily medications? How many campers come to the Health Center each day? How many physician visits were needed? How many ER visits? How many overnight stays in the health center? Was last summer the year when the stomach bug happened and you don't want to scare everybody off? Then share averages from more than one summer and explain that the previous summer was not the norm.

**Camp Populations:** Describe the age range of the campers, whether the camp is single gender or co-ed, and whether there are special camper populations. What is the length of stay for the campers? Do the kids stay the whole summer or does the population change each week? Or, is there a mix of stays during the summer. Describe the staff in terms of age, number, and experience as well as the usual demands of staff on the Health Center.

**Typical Day:** Share the daily schedule of both the camp and the health center. Clarify camp activities in which the nurse is expected to participate. For example, is the nurse expected to be in the dining hall during each meal?

**Additional responsibilities:** If nurses are expected to do such things as laundry, staff education, kitchen/cabin inspections, supply ordering or billing, be sure they know this. A brief description of what is entailed in opening and closing the Health Center for the season may also be helpful.

**Special rules:** If smoking or pets are unacceptable, make sure the nurse is aware of this. Conversely, if these are allowed make sure they know they may be sharing premises with smokers and pets.

If you share this information with a nurse interested in a position you can be confident that you are hiring an informed nurse and your chances are good that you will have a happy, qualified camp nurse. But there are still no guarantees.

### **Advance Preparation**

Once a nurse is hired, suggest some references that the nurse might use to prepare for coming to camp. Don't wait until arrival at camp to give your nurse resources to learn more about your camp specifically and about camp nursing in general. This will be helpful to the nurse to improve skills for caring for children in a camp setting. Table 1 lists resources that may be helpful and suggestions can be tailored to the individual nurse's background and your camp's needs. You will probably have additional resources that are applicable to your specific camp, camp population, or camp activities. Providing this information allows the nurse to refresh skills, become more familiar with what to expect and empowers that nurse to be successful in the camp nurse role.

### **Making the Nurse Feel Welcomed**

It is great for the nurse to feel like a part of the camp family as soon as possible. Once the nurse arrives at camp encourage interaction with the rest of the staff. Encourage returning staff to make the nurse welcome and include the nurse as appropriate. Let the nurse know that you want them to feel comfortable and are available to them. Make it a practice to check in with the nurse daily to make sure everything is going well. All of these things help make a nurse feel more capable, confident and comfortable. Doing so will certainly increase your chances of having a nurse who performs well and enjoys the summer.

When your nurses do have quiet times, make sure they understand what activities they can participate in and the equipment they have access to. Make sure the nurses are aware of any special camp activities such as campfires, intercamp competitions and special programs. If it's "Crazy Hat Dinner" or "Come Dressed as your Super Hero" be sure they know. After all....all work and no play can make a long, dull summer and an unhappy nurse.

### **Your Contingency Plan**

Even with all this preparation and continued support to the new nurse, it is good to remember the motto, "Expect the best but prepare for the worst." Have a contingency plan. You may feel like you hired the best nurse in the world. That nurse may discover that she doesn't like the job and quit or you may discover that the nurse isn't practicing safely and terminate the contract. You never know when even nurses who love the job and would never dream of leaving midseason, need to do so because of illness or family emergencies. Don't wait until this happens before thinking about what your options might be. In our situation last summer, I was made painfully aware that we had not thought

about a plan in case something like this happened. You might look at it as another potential disaster for which you have a plan but hope you will never have to use it.

Networking prior to the season will get you a list of possibilities for nurses who might be willing to do short term stints if necessary. Ask camper parents, local hospital staff nurses or talk to private duty agencies if available in your community. Communicate with other camps in your area--they might have a nurse who would be willing and able to help out in a pinch. Call the school--maybe the school nurse isn't able to do the whole summer but could help on check-in days or when things get out of hand. The local pharmacy or home care agency may know of nurses in the community you might contact. In the case of staff illness or short-term emergency, getting help for a few hours at critical times of the day or even for a few days might make the difference between disaster and safety. Maybe one of your present nurses has a friend that would like to come down to finish out the summer.

Don't forget to utilize other staff if you see your health staff getting overworked. If the nurses are normally responsible for such things as cabin inspections and laundry temporarily, get the director to help assign non-nursing tasks to other staff. It is really a mistake to try to totally cover for a missing nurse. You may be able to do it for a few days but if a solution is not immediately forthcoming, you will run out of steam. If an illness strikes many, the need for additional cleaning is also required. The thing I appreciated the most the summer our camp had a siege with a stomach bug was the staff and leaders who cleaned, brought in extra supplies and took care of trash, etc. They were capable of doing these things and freed the nurses to have more time to do the things only nurses were capable of doing.

### **In Closing**

Don't take your health staff for granted and encourage other key camp staff members to do the same. Be available to them if there is a problem. Everyone likes to know when they are appreciated. Compliment them for a job well done. Treat them like the important staff members that they are. You will find that you will be more likely to have nurses that provide great care, are appreciated by both campers and staff and enjoy their summer.

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Table 1.  
**Resources for the New Camp Nurse**

- **Association of Camp Nurses:** Inform them of the organization and how to make contact with the Web Site ([www.campnurse.org](http://www.campnurse.org)). Check to see when the new Practice Standards will be ready.
- ***The Basics of Camp Nursing*** by Linda Erceg and Myra Pravda. Published by the American Camping Association, it is available through both the ACN store and the ACA's bookstore ([www.aca.org](http://www.aca.org)). This has valuable information for the camp nurse.
- **Camp Nurse Seminars:** Make new staff aware of educational opportunities for the camp nurse and consider providing the fee. This could be the best money you have ever spent.
- **First Aid Book:** This could be a good refresher for the nurse as well as a resource for preparing for staff education during staff orientation. You have probably identified the one that seems to suit your camp best. Make sure you have the most current edition. These are also readily available in most bookstores and libraries.
- **Reference Books and/or Websites:** You may want to suggest specific books or websites that are helpful for individual problems they might encounter. Such problems might include sports injuries, asthma, rashes, and behavior issues such as homesickness.
- **Medication List:** Provide a list of the most common medications administered in your camp setting. It gives the nurse a chance to review those medications that aren't so familiar.
- **Staff Manual:** Does your camp have a staff manual? Provide this prior to the camp season so the nurse can become more familiar with the camp layout, camp activities and even camp lingo.
- **Standing Orders:** You may want to provide the nurse with the Health Center's Standing Orders. These vary tremendously in the level of detail, topics included, and specificity. The nurse needs to know what is included.
- **Camp Nursing Articles:** One of the most helpful articles for new nurses appeared in *CompassPoint* (10:3, 2000, p4-6). Written by Alison L. Crane, RN, MS, the titles of this two part article are, "Five Rookie Mistakes and Five Lessons Learned" and "Five Things We Did Right."