



## CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL LOS ANGELES: 20 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE | ORIGIN STORY

Location: Pediatric Hospital Located in Los Angeles, CA

Services: 495 Beds, 106 Pediatric Critical Care Beds, Level 1 Trauma Center  
A Pediatric Academic Medical Center

### BACKGROUND

Founded in 1901, Children's Hospital Los Angeles was the first pediatric hospital in Southern California and today is one of the leading pediatric academic medical centers in the nation—ranked No. 1 in the western U.S. and No. 5 in the country by U.S. News & World Report. With more than half a million patient visits and more than 17,000 surgeries a year, CHLA provides world-class care for babies, children and adolescents, many of which are struggling with the most medically complex conditions.

Nurses are the lifeblood of this care. And in 1999, hospital leaders became concerned about predictions of a 21st century nursing shortage. They understood that a wave of older nurses would naturally begin to retire in the coming decade. Additionally, hospitals across the country, including CHLA, were struggling with high turnover rates for new graduate nurses. Something was clearly amiss: New nurses were not getting the support they needed to succeed.

The hospital was among the first organizations in the country to recognize this critical need for systematic and supportive onboarding of new graduate nurses. Children's Hospital Los Angeles developed an innovative program that would revolutionize the onboarding process and engage each individual as a professional pediatric nurse.

### CHALLENGES

High Turnover among new graduate nurses

Minimal pediatric training in schools

Need for one-on-one support for new grads

### SOLUTIONS

Creation of RN Residency

Cultural Change

Birth of a National Model

Expanding the opportunity


### RESULTS

Improved recruitment and retention

Highly developed workforce

"Setting people up for success"

20 years of nursing excellence



The estimated cost of turnover is 1.2 to 1.3 times the salary of an existing nurse. Developing and retaining its own nurses allowed CHLA to avoid over-reliance on costly temporary nursing services, foster the development of its own staff—and ensure a healthy nursing foundation for the hospital's future.

“Most nursing students receive limited pediatric training. In 1999, with the high acuity of our patients and the increasing complexity of care, we knew we needed to help new graduates bridge that gap,” said Suzanne Taylor, EdD, MSN, RN-BC, Director of Clinical Education and Professional Development at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. “We wanted to nurture them on their journey to becoming a confident pediatric nurse who could safely and expertly care for our young patients.”

## LAUNCH

### Creation of RN Residency

In 1997, nursing leaders at Children's Hospital Los Angeles created an internal team to overhaul the onboarding process for new graduate nurses. At the time, most new grads received only a six-week orientation period.

The team developed a completely new approach: a comprehensive RN/BSN training program that would last six months, as opposed to six weeks. During that time, each new grad would care for patients alongside an experienced CHLA nurse preceptor. By working one-on-one with the new grad for this extended period, the preceptor could teach skills, share knowledge, and ensure patient safety and quality of care.

In addition, participants would attend more than 200 hours of classes—a new curriculum created by the CHLA team. Each new grad would be assigned a mentor and participate in support groups, where residents could discuss challenges and the emotional issues of dealing with critically ill children and their families. Importantly, participants would go through the training with a cohort of peers who could support them along the way.

As the hospital prepared for the next century, it welcomed its first cohort in July 1999. The immediate results: higher quality care scores, skyrocketing retention, and improved patient and workforce satisfaction. Among new graduate nurses, turnover rates quickly fell by more than half and continued to plummet. In 1998, before the program began, 36% of new grads left the hospital after one year, and 56% left after two years. Today, one-year turnover for that group is less than 6%, and two-year turnover is under 13%.

### Cultural Change

Children's Hospital spent two years developing its initial program. It was a vastly different approach than its prior six-week orientation, and it was a big cultural change for all involved. Hospital leaders were receptive to the program, but there were many unknowns. Would experienced nurses enjoy precepting or resist it? Would new grads balk at going through such an extended training period? Would there be a loss of productivity? Would the program work—and would it be sustainable?

But the residency's benefits quickly became apparent. Overall work satisfaction and engagement rose. Senior nurses took pride knowing that they made an impact on a new nurse's development. The Operations team recognized the dramatic decrease in new nurse turnover. Patients and families enjoyed having “two nurses.” And clinicians across the hospital observed high levels of clinical performance at the bedside.

"It creates a sense of camaraderie. Having been in classes with my cohort, it was reassuring to see familiar faces when I went to different areas of the hospital," said Beth Zemetra, BSN, RN, MHA, NE-BC, who graduated from the first residency in 1999 and is now the Operations Manager for The Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Foundation Cardiothoracic Intensive Care Unit (CTICU) at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. "The residency made CHLA my home."

"Everyone in our hospital understands how valuable this residency is," Taylor said. "The mantra is: We would never go back to where we came from; this is now our standard. We can't imagine onboarding new nurses in any other way."

### **Birth of a National Model**

With Children's Hospital Los Angeles seeing such great success, other hospitals soon became interested in partnering with CHLA to replicate the program at their own institutions. CHLA formed a separate organization – Versant New Graduate RN Residency™ —in 2004 to implement the program at other institutions. Today, the model has grown and evolved into the Versant Healthcare Competency Solutions™, maintaining its focus on fundamentally transforming healthcare outcomes by developing the workforce's ability to provide safe, efficient, competency-based care. Since beginning at CHLA, this competency-based solution has become a nationally-recognized model for transitioning nurses into the workforce.





## Expanding the Opportunity

After seeing the benefits from a structured and highly supportive onboarding program, nurse executives at Children's Hospital Los Angeles saw another opportunity. New graduate nurses are not the only ones who require comprehensive, standardized onboarding. How could they ensure that experienced nurses who were transitioning into a pediatric specialty for the first time were also given the support they needed?

The answer was to implement the Versant Transition Nurse Fellowship™. Under this program, nurses from other disciplines who are transitioning into the acute care pediatric environment are supported with the same kind of one-on-one, competency-based onboarding that new graduates receive.

By giving these nurses an opportunity to successfully transition to the pediatric acute care environment, the fellowship expanded the number of nurses eligible to practice at the hospital and increased the nursing skill mix on patient floors. Both transition-to-practice programs are rigorous and challenging. But one key to success is the cohort structure, which gives nurses an immediate peer support system—and a sense of belonging that lasts long past the completion of the programs.

## RESULTS

### Improved Recruitment and Retention

In addition to dramatically lowering nurse turnover rates, the Versant RN Residency has significantly boosted nurse recruitment. On average, CHLA receives 600 applications to fill just 60 spots for each new graduate cohort.

"Some years we've had up to 1,000 applicants for one cohort. That shows you just how sought-after this program is," said Charissa Altobar, BSN, RN, NE-BC, Manager of the Versant RN Residency in Pediatrics at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. "Nursing students are well aware of the benefits they'll receive from Versant training programs. As a result, we can choose from among the most talented and highest-quality applicants."

Once at CHLA, many of those nurses stay long-term. The average tenure of a Children's Hospital nurse today is 9.5 years. With stable retention numbers and a pipeline of high-quality candidates eager to be part of the team, the hospital is able to provide the highest quality care and minimize dependence on temporary nursing staff.

"All of our nurses are trained in competencies specific to the patients that come through the doors at Children's Hospital Los Angeles," Altobar said. "The residency and fellowship have helped ensure that our nurses can consistently and confidently deliver the highly specialized care our patients need."

### Highly Developed Workforce

Quality patient care requires nurses to have extensive experience at the point of care. Today, Children's Hospital Los Angeles has one of the most experienced nursing staffs in the region—with 89% of nurses holding a BSN degree or higher and more than 60% holding an advanced pediatric-related specialty certification. Among its nurse leaders, 86% have national board certification. These numbers far exceed national averages.

Many of those nurses got their start in the Versant RN Residency. In fact, about 50% of the hospital's nursing staff has graduated from the program. Nearly 40 of the hospital's current nurse managers, directors and leads came up through the residency.

### **'Setting People Up for Success'**

One of those nurse leaders is David Romberger, MSN, RN, CCRN. Romberger was an RN resident at CHLA in the fall of 2003 in the CTICU. The foundational training he received there was essential to his success, and he eventually transitioned from bedside nurse to Operations Manager and is now Director of the Heart Institute.

"My case is a great example of long-term investment and payoff provided through the residency," Romberger said. "The residency is not only about new grad education, training our workforce and a safe care model; it's also about setting people up for success for the rest of their lives."

The investment in his success made him want to do the same thing for future generations. "Programs like the Versant RN Residency," he explained, "shift the culture of a team or organization from focusing on personal performance to how you can invest in others, since someone else has invested in your own development."





## 20 Years of Nursing Excellence

Since founding the RN residency program in 1999, Children's Hospital Los Angeles has continued to grow and strengthen its nursing excellence.

The hospital is proud to have maintained Magnet® recognition status from the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) since 2008. This recognition is the most prestigious distinction a health care organization can receive for nursing excellence and quality patient outcomes—with only the top-performing U.S. hospitals achieving this status. The Versant residency and fellowship programs contribute toward one of the standards required to be a Magnet hospital.

“Over the past decade, transition-to-practice programs have continued to emerge as an indicator of health care organizations’ commitment to advancing the practice of nursing,” said Sandy Hall, MSN, MBA, RN-BC, NE-BC, Manager of Nursing Excellence at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and a 2006 graduate of the Versant RN Residency. “The ANCC recognizes the need for transition to practice not only through Magnet standards but also through its Practice Transition Accreditation Program. And program outcomes are demonstrating that nurses who participate in our RN residency are more competent, confident, and satisfied in their work.”

On the research front, CHLA nurses—including many Versant alumni—have given countless presentations at national conferences over the past 20 years. In 2018, 51 Children’s Hospital nurses gave poster and podium presentations across the country, and 26 authored publications. In addition, the hospital’s Institute for Nursing and Interprofessional Research continually fosters and supports innovative research among nurses and other patient care professionals.

As part of the Versant RN Residency in Pediatrics, new graduate nurses also get early exposure to evidence-based practice (EBP) research. Residents work in groups to complete an EBP project, systematically searching and appraising evidence to ultimately identify best practices. Since 2014, residents at CHLA have completed more than 120 EBP projects and presented more than 30 at national conferences.

“The residency brought about a culture change in our organization and helped us to truly embody what it means to be a teaching facility, far beyond physician education,” Hall said. “Providing a standardized program to ensure optimal competence in our nurses empowers us to positively impact all aspects of patient care—including patient outcomes.”

*“Children’s Hospital Los Angeles is proud to have been the founding hospital for the RN residency program. Over the past 20 years, the residency not only has supported the professional development of our individual nurses, but it has helped ensure that we have the stable, expert nursing workforce we need to provide the highest quality care for patients with the most complex and medically challenging conditions. Every day, I am inspired by the tremendous skills, knowledge and dedication of our nursing team. The residency program plays an essential role in fostering this excellence.”*

**Nancy Lee, RN, MSN, NEA-BC**  
**Senior Vice President and Chief Clinical Officer**  
**Children’s Hospital Los Angeles**



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