

Opinion

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Regulators making nursing shortage worse

By Mikhail Shneyder

It's September, and hundreds of nursing school graduates across California, including those in San Diego County, are fully educated and trained but barred from taking the exam that would let them join the nursing workforce. These graduates aren't waiting for paperwork. They're waiting on the California Board of Registered Nursing, the very agency responsible for solving this state's nursing shortage. Instead, the board is making it worse.

That's why Nightingale College filed suit against the Board of Registered Nursing in Sacramento County Superior Court on Aug. 24. Our complaint asks the court to void two standards the Board of Registered Nursing has used to block our graduates' license applications — standards never lawfully adopted through the state's own rulemaking process.

The board also discussed enforcement of these standards at public meetings without placing the matter on the agenda, in violation of California's Open Meeting Act.

We didn't take this step lightly. We acted after months of documented outreach asking the Board of Registered Nursing for a specific explanation and timeline. We received neither.

Consider two San Diego nurses caught in the middle.

— Jessica Leonard, an Oceanside resident and mother of three, spent three and a half years earning her bachelor of science in nursing from Nightingale while working full time as an advanced care technician at a local medical center. She's a finalist for a new-graduate registered nurse residency on the same oncology unit where she already works. Her application is complete and paid for. She cannot get a testing date, and she cannot tell her

employer when or whether she'll be licensed.

— Sasha Wiltjer, a San Diego licensed vocational nurse of 11 years who works at a San Diego hospital, completed her Nightingale bachelor of science in nursing this spring while working full-time night shifts and raising four children. She has already passed her licensing exam and holds an active registered nurse license — in Utah. She was hired into the hospital's Sept. 18 new-graduate registered nurse cohort. However, because California still won't process her application, the hospital has agreed to defer her position until March 2027.

Both women met every requirement the law imposes. Neither has been given a reason for the delay.

Nightingale College, which has produced nearly 2,000 licensed California nurses since 2015 and currently serves 8,152 California learners, is the largest single

nursing education provider in the state. The hold on bachelor of science in nursing graduates began as a request tied to a single graduate's application; that graduate has since tested and is now a licensed nurse. Yet the board continued and expanded its hold on hundreds of other graduates — who had nothing to do with that original request — without a new explanation or timeline. As of late August, 439 graduates have been formally notified their applications are on hold; roughly 70 have already lost a job offer, and nearly 200 more are at risk.

This matters most acutely here. San Diego County is part of a state where nearly 60% of counties already qualify as nursing shortage areas. Two-thirds of qualified nursing school applications statewide are turned away for lack of space, and California already has the worst projected nursing shortage in the nation. San Diego hospi-

tals need these nurses now.

A licensing board's job is to administer nursing licensure, not to sit on applications from graduates when it has articulated no basis for concern. If the board has substantive issues with our bachelor of science in nursing program, we welcome that conversation. We've asked for it directly and repeatedly, long before filing suit.

Jessica and Sasha aren't asking for anything handed to them. They're asking to take an exam they've already earned the right to sit for. California doesn't have a shortage of nurses willing to work. It has an abundance of nurses forbidden to start.

Shneyder is the founder and CEO of Nightingale Education Group, the parent company of Nightingale College, founded in 2012. He trained in nursing and received an MBA from the Haas School at UC Berkeley.