

[NEW ZEALAND \(/NEWS/NATIONAL\)](#) / [HEALTH \(/TAGS/HEALTH\)](#)

Hospitals short an average of 587 nurses every shift last year - report

5:00 am on 17 September 2025

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subject=Hospitals%20short%20an%20average%20of%20587%20nurses%20every%20shift%20last%20year%20-%20report)



New Zealand Nurses Organisation chief executive Paul Goulter at a rally in Christchurch on 9 May 2024. Photo: RNZ / Nate McKinnon

Hospitals were short an average of 587 nurses every shift last year, according to [a new report by Infometrics for the nurses' union](#).

The report, titled 'How many more nurses does New Zealand need?', was based on Te Whatu Ora data from 1.69 million shifts between 2022 and 2024 in 59 public hospitals.

New Zealand Nurses' Organisation chief executive Paul Goulter said the findings put paid to Te Whatu Ora's claims that hospitals weren't short-staffed.

He said patient safety was being put at risk by an ongoing recruitment freeze - a freeze which Te Whatu Ora denies.

Nadine Gray, national chief nurse for Health New Zealand, said in a statement: "We value the significant contribution of our nursing workforce in helping to care for the health of New Zealanders and their communities, and we look forward to considering NZNO's report."

The report found understaffing was most common in the Capital, Coast and Hutt Valley district, with 51 percent of shifts understaffed between January 2022 and November 2024.

Counties Manukau followed on 48 percent. Taranaki District was the lowest on 19 percent.

Some departments shorter staffed than others

The report found cancer, heart and trauma patients had faced the most understaffed wards and emergency departments (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/571980/nurses-midwives-and-health-care-assistants-strike-for-second-day>) over the past three years.

Union president Anne Daniels said 49 percent of all shifts in these areas failed to meet safe staffing requirements set out under the Care Capacity Demand Management programme.

"That means these vulnerable patients faced a shortage of nurses to care for them one in every two shifts. This rose to 66 percent for day shifts if you were in an inpatient cancer ward and 62 percent if you were in a cardiovascular ward."

Forty-five percent of shifts on children's wards were understaffed, followed by 36 percent of shifts in critical care and emergency departments.

"These wards and emergency departments treat our most vulnerable patients," Daniels said. "It is not good enough that we don't have enough nurses to give them the timely and quality care they need because we are constantly short-staffed."

Mental health wards were also affected, with 11 of them, including Hillmorton Hospital in Christchurch (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/569788/canterbury-s-mental-health-services-inquiry-findings-really-concerning-psychiatrist-says>), featuring in the 39 most understaffed wards in the country, Daniels said.

Union president Anne Daniels. Photo: RNZ / Pretoria Gordon

Capital, Coast and Hutt Valley's mental health ward in Porirua was short-staffed overnight 100 percent of the time between January 2022 and November 2024, and Hutt Hospital's was short-staffed overnight 99 percent of the time.

"The Coalition government, and Mental Health Minister Matthew Doocey, claim mental health services are a priority. If this is truly the case, it is time for mental health wards to have the safe staffing their patients deserve," she said.

Doocey said in a statement: "Mental health is a priority for this government, that's why the registered mental health nursing workforce has grown 21 percent since coming to office."



Iwi and Māori health providers struggling to hire and keep staff

The report found iwi and Māori health providers were struggling to attract and retain nurses because of poor pay and short-term government funding arrangements.

There were 841 nurses working at Māori and Iwi providers in 2023 representing 551 full time equivalents (FTEs) because of the high number of nurses working part-time.

Union kaiwhakahaere Kerri Nuku said to keep up with projected growth of the Māori population, that number would need to rise from 551 FTEs to 679, a rise of 128.

One provider had been unable to fill two vacant nurse positions for more than eight months.

"Not only do these providers tend to have sicker patients, they're limited in their ability to increase fees because many of their patients are on low incomes," Nuku said.

Nuku said the government needed to increase funding so providers could attract and retain nurses.

"As we learnt during the Covid response, Māori and Iwi health providers are key to turning around Māori health inequities and saving the health system money in the long run," she said.

Health Minister says government already hiring more nurses

Health Minister Simeon Brown. Photo: Calvin Samuel / RNZ

Health Minister Simeon Brown said in a statement: "Our government is already hiring more nurses, as acknowledged by NZNO, but we agree more must be done to ensure we have enough nurses in the right places."



He said nurses played a "vital role in achieving our reintroduced health targets" and "ensuring we have the right number of skilled nurses in the right places means Kiwis can access timely, quality care when they need it most".

"That's why we're investing an additional \$16.68 billion in health over three budgets, making sure our services are properly resourced to meet growing demand. A key focus of this investment is strengthening and growing frontline services in hospitals and in the community."

Health New Zealand had previously accused the union of being "misleading" (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/571718/union-says-health-nz-s-delay-in-releasing-data-was-politically-motivated>) in its reporting of short-staffed shifts, saying the tool used to measure whether a shift was short-staffed or not - known as 'shift below target' - was only a snapshot, based on a moment in time.

The union told RNZ this latest report was based on a different measure, known as 'care hours variance', which instead measured how many hours a shift was short-staffed.

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