

Questions to Ask

In Making the Decision to Accept a Staffing Assignment *

1. What is the assignment?
2. Clarify the assignment. Do not assume. Be certain that what you believe is the assignment is indeed correct.
3. What are the characteristics of the patients being assigned?
4. Don't just respond to the number of patients; make a critical assessment of the needs of each patient, his or her age, condition, other factors that contribute to special needs, and the resources available to meet those needs. Who else is on the unit or within the facility that might be a resource for the assignment? Do nurses on the unit have access to those resources? How stable are the patients, and for what period of time have they been stable? Do any patients have communication and/or physical limitations that will require accommodation and extra supervision during the shift? Will there be discharges to offset the load? If there are discharges, will there be admissions, which require extra time and energy?
5. Do I have the expertise to care for the patients?
6. Am I familiar with caring for the types of patients assigned? If this is a "float assignment," am I cross-trained to care for these patients? Is there a "buddy system" in place with staff familiar with the unit? If there is no cross-training or "buddy system," has the patient load been modified accordingly?
7. Do I have the experience and knowledge to manage the patients for whom I am being assigned care?
8. If the answer to the question is no, you have an obligation to articulate limitations. Limitations in experience and knowledge may not require refusal of the assignment but rather an agreement regarding supervision or a modification of the assignment to ensure patient safety. If no accommodation for limitations is considered, the nurse has an obligation to refuse an assignment for which she or he lacks education or experience.
9. What is the geography of the assignment?
10. Am I being asked to care for patients who are in close proximity for efficient management, or are the patients at opposite ends of the hall or on different units? If there are geographic difficulties, what resources are available to manage the situation? If my patients are on more than one unit and I must go to another unit to provide care, who will monitor patients out of my immediate attention?
11. Is this a temporary assignment?

12. When other staff are located to assist, will I be relieved? If the assignment is temporary, it may be possible to accept a difficult assignment, knowing that there will soon be reinforcements. Is there a pattern of short staffing, or is this truly an emergency?
13. Is this a crisis or an ongoing staffing pattern?
14. If the assignment is being made because of an immediate need on the unit, a crisis, the decision to accept the assignment may be based on that immediate need. However, if the staffing pattern is an ongoing problem, the nurse has the obligation to identify unmet standards of care that are occurring as a result of ongoing staffing inadequacies. This may result in a request for “safe harbor” and/or peer review.
15. Can I take the assignment in good faith? If not, you will need to get the assignment modified or refuse the assignment.
16. Consult your individual state’s nursing practice act regarding clarification of accepting an assignment in good faith. In understanding good faith, it is sometimes easier to identify what would constitute bad faith. For example, if you had not taken care of pediatric patients since nursing school and you were asked to take charge of a pediatric unit, unless this were an extreme emergency such as a disaster (in which case you would need to let people know your limitations, but you might still be the best person, given all factors for the assignment), it would be bad faith to take the assignment. It is always your responsibility to articulate your limitations and to get an adjustment to the assignment that acknowledges the limitations you have articulated. Good faith acceptance of the assignment means that you are concerned about the situation and believe that a different pattern of care or policy should be considered. However, you acknowledge the difference of opinion on the subject between you and your supervisor and are willing to take the assignment and await the judgment of other peers/supervisors.

* Adapted from the Texas Nurses Association
www.texasnurses.org/wkplaceadv/StaffingGuide_Conflicts.doc