

A nursing debate: Should there be nurse-to-patient ratios?

By [Corrie MacLaggan](#) | Thursday, March 5, 2009, 01:14 PM

A fight about how best to retain hospital nurses is playing out at the Capitol, and backers of two different legislative strategies each claim their plan better ensures patient safety.

On Tuesday, the Senate Health and Human Services Committee considered a plan by State Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, the panel's chairwoman, that would require Texas hospitals to have a nursing staffing committee that reports directly to the hospital board. The proposal, Senate Bill 476 — which is backed by the Texas Nurses Association — says that half of the committee's members should be nurses. Austin Democratic Rep. Donna Howard, who has worked as a critical care nurse, has an identical bill in her chamber, House Bill 591.

Supporters says that the bill strengthens nurses' voice in staffing decisions and allows hospitals to consider the unique needs of each facility.

"It is important that we retain our hospital nurses, given the nursing shortage that we're hearing about," said Nelson, whose panel has not voted on the measure.

But Austin nurse Beverly Leonard told senators that the bill makes no substantial changes to current law.

Leonard said that nurses have too many patients and that "the best quality of care that we would love to give is not possible."

Leonard, a member of the National Nurses Organizing Committee - Texas, is backing a different proposal, by Rep. Senfronia Thompson and Sen. Mario Gallegos, both Houston Democrats.

That proposal — House Bill 1489 and Senate Bill 1000 — would set minimum requirements for nurse-to-patient ratios. The ratios would depend on the type of care being provided.

At a Wednesday press conference, Thompson told of how her granddaughter in Trinity, Texas, was ill recently with a 104.6-degree fever. She waited more than four hours at Huntsville Memorial Hospital without being treated; her mother finally took her home, Thompson said. The next day she was diagnosed with strep throat and an ear infection, Thompson said.

"Those nurses were so ... overburdened with people coming into the E.R.," said Thompson, who was joined at the press conference by nurses from around the state. "They were not able to take care of her."

"I'm not interested in my granddaughter dying," Thompson said.