

Suzi Laj, RN, BN, MHS; Ronak Gandhi, RN, BScN, MN; Leo Zhu, RN, BScN, MN; Kimberly Macias, RN, BScN, MN; Victoria Le, RN, BScN, MN, CCRN; Anna Marie Kolodziej, RN, BScN, MN; Sarah Banani, RN, BScN, MBA

DESCRIPTION

Humber River Health (HRH)'s Intensive Care Unit (ICU) faced unprecedented recruitment and retention challenges during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by high burnout, critical staffing shortages, and turnover. In response, the unit launched a strategic, multipronged workforce transformation plan focused on early engagement, professional development, and leadership cultivation. This included creating a homegrown critical care certificate program, developing a competency-based growth model using Benner's framework, and integrating evidence-based retention strategies referencing Dr. Leigh Chapman's Nursing Retention Toolkit. By targeting workforce stability, resilience, and clinical excellence, HRH's ICU improved nurse satisfaction and retention, achieved cost savings and eliminated agency reliance. This initiative serves as a scalable model for addressing critical nursing workforce gaps while maintaining quality care delivery in high-acuity settings.

OBJECTIVE

To strengthen ICU nurse retention and resilience through targeted recruitment, development, and professional growth strategies.

ACTIONS TAKEN

HRH's ICU implemented a multipronged approach to workforce development. Key actions included:

- Offering clinical consolidation placements in ICU for final year students.
- Partnering with a credited college to create an HRH tailored critical care certificate program.
- Designing a competency-based development model using Benner's framework.
- Supporting novice to expert nurses with tailored onboarding, mentorship, and leadership pathways.
- Integrating Dr. Leigh Chapman's Nursing Retention Toolkit to guide workflow redesign and governance.
- Prioritizing ongoing staff engagement through collaborative projects and leadership development.



Figure 1. From single lane to multi-lane: HRH's ICU recruitment strategies involve multiple pathways of entry.

Using Benner's Novice-to-Expert Theoretical Framework in Professional Development at HRH

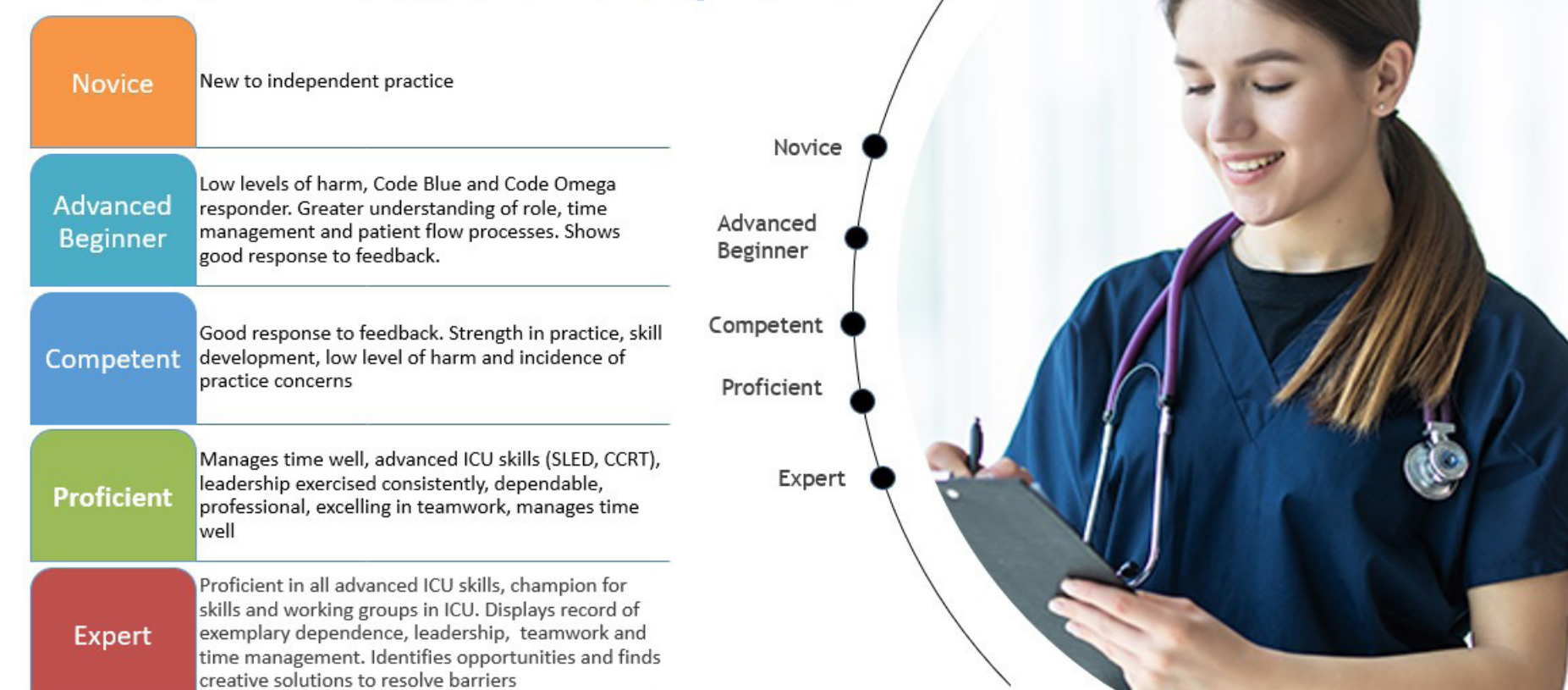


Figure 2. Navigating growth: HRH's ICU competency-based growth model is based on Benner's Novice-to-Expert Theoretical Framework.

CRITICAL CARE COMPETENCY ANALYSIS

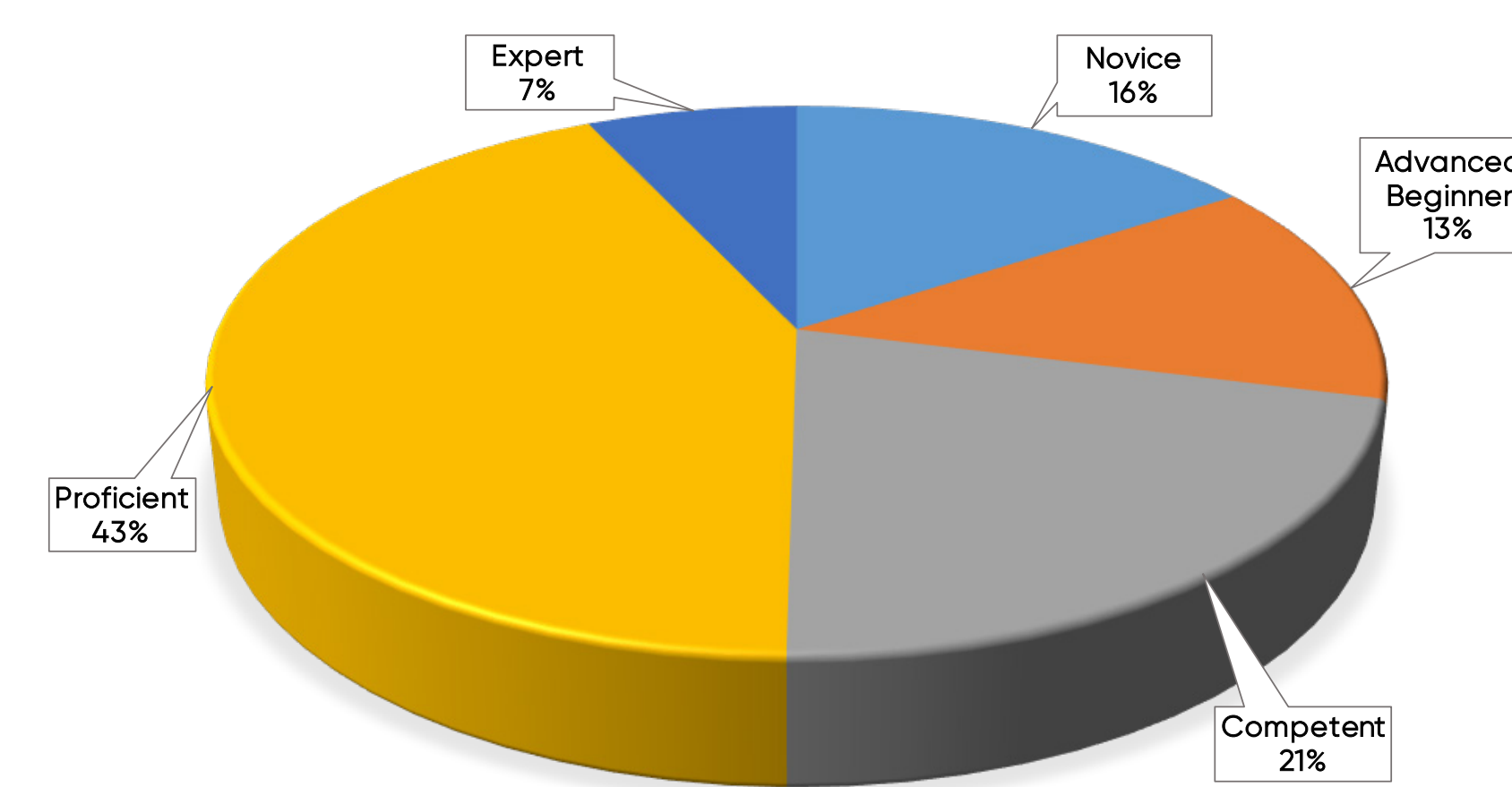


Figure 3. Based on HRH's ICU tailored categories referencing Benner's Novice-to-Expert Theoretical Framework, a competency assessment was completed in early 2025 across the critical care program. Successful recruitment and retention strategies have strengthened the competency levels of HRH's ICU nursing staff.

Intensive Care Unit Overtime Costs

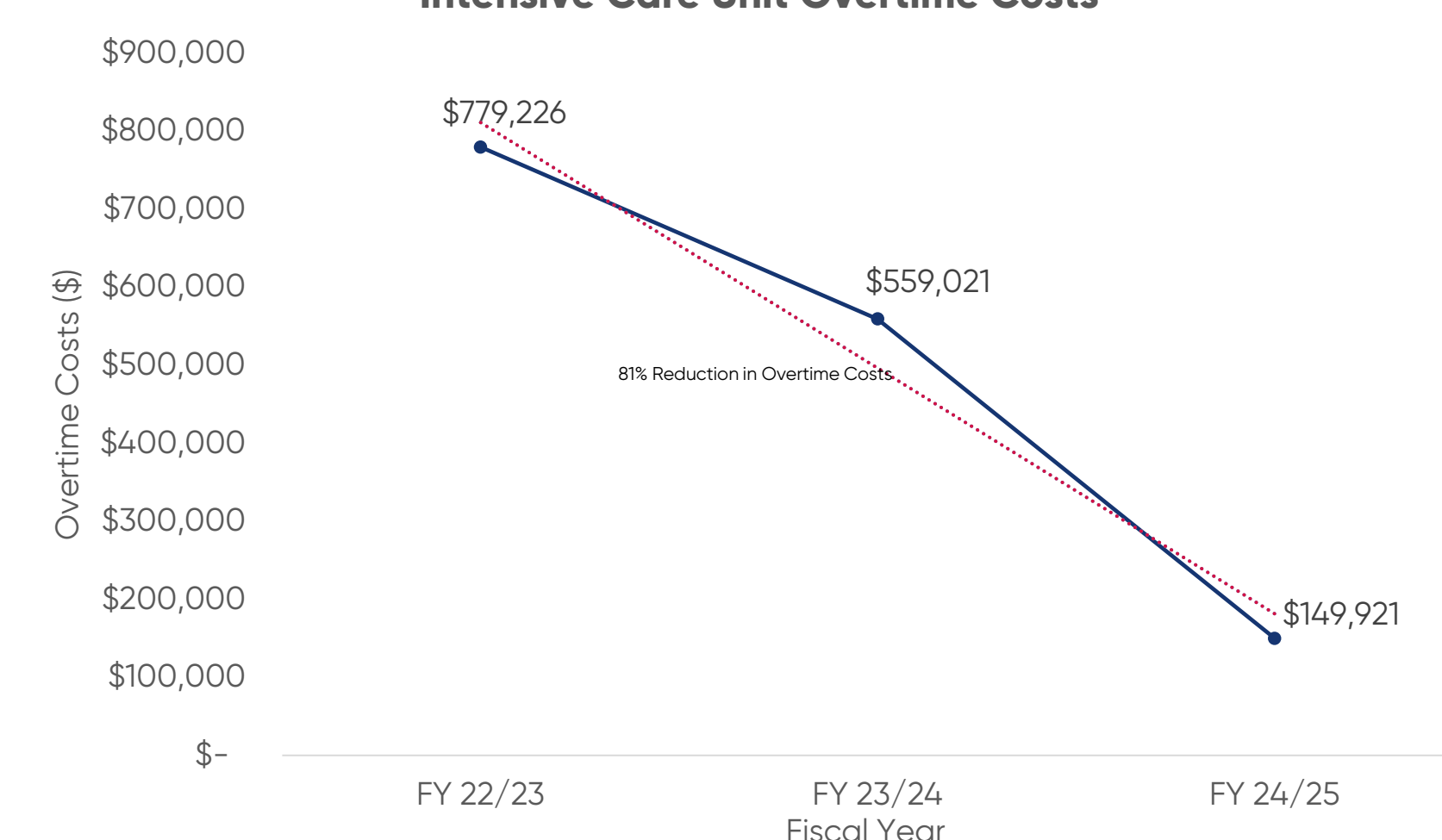


Figure 4. There was an 81% reduction in overtime costs from Fiscal Year 2022/23 to 2024/25, saving \$629,305.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The ICU experienced:

- 26% reduction in nursing resignation rate.
- 82% retention of new graduate nurses (2022-2025).
- 81% reduction in overtime costs, saving \$629,305.
- 0% full-time vacancy as of July 2025 (down from 40 full-time vacancies in 2022).
- The ICU has consistently operated without agency staffing from 2021 to the present.

Positive outcome measures reflect the success of strategic investments in early engagement, competency-based growth, and professional development. Notably, workforce improvements were achieved without compromising patient care, demonstrating HRH's multipronged approach to effectively balance quality care, team resilience, and operational efficiency.

LESSONS LEARNED

Investing in early engagement, competency-based development, and structured retention strategies creates a sustainable ICU workforce model that strengthens nurse satisfaction, reduces costly turnover, and safeguards high-quality patient care.

