



# Travel Nursing 101: Get the Facts

By Mary Catello



Travel nursing can be exciting, professionally rewarding, and offer endless possibilities and opportunities in personal time management. It allows nurses to journey to new places with great salaries while learning new skills and creating a marketable professional profile.

There are things you need to know before you go, from realizing what you want from a company to being able to identify contracts that may restrict your career. Here is a list of points to consider that will help you ensure that your travel experience is one that you will want to repeat.

### Choosing the right staffing agency

Before you take an assignment with any travel staffing company, ask around and see what you can find out. Have other RNs you know worked with staffing agencies? How did they go about it? Did they like the experience?

In addition to considering reputation and breadth of positions offered by staffing agencies, ask about support, preferred housing, and on-going continuing education programs. Online career management



tools and assignment selections are additional convenient perks that may pique your interest. Support, either clinical or personal, should be available around the clock and throughout the year.

Everyone wants advice now and then, especially when it comes to your career. Make sure the guidance you receive comes from a trusted source. Some agencies offer advice from registered nurses who act as liaisons to the company's travelers. Travelers can address professional concerns, seek educational advice, and even receive support during their facility evaluation. It's also helpful to look for agencies that are recognized by The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), which accredits and certifies more than 15,000 health care organizations and programs throughout the U.S.

One of the obvious benefits to becoming a travel nurse is being able to choose where you want to go. That's why when deciding on a company, look for one that offers you a variety of locations, and has opportunities in

all fifty states and possibly the Caribbean. Contracted assignments are generally a minimum of 13 weeks, although this can vary. Most assignments can be extended if you choose to continue at that facility or stay in that location. If you're considering moving to another location, this is a great way to explore other places, practice settings and workplace environments.

Remember that nurses like you are the cornerstones of any travel staffing company. You want a company that recognizes this fact. Customer care is important. Look for a recruiter who can provide you more than just a great job. A recruiter should also offer you insight and guidance on every assignment – you should be able to sit down and ask questions about the assignment and openly discuss your contract. If you are ever dissatisfied with your recruiter, you should have the option to change to someone you feel completely comfortable with.

### Salary and benefits

Nursing salaries in the travel industry vary by location, specialty, shift, and can range anywhere from

\$24-\$45 per hour. Shift differentials and overtime are additional dollars that may be contract specific with your agency. Pay is generally higher in regions of the country with the highest cost of living: New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and other major metropolitan areas.

Some staffing companies offer their nurses complete comprehensive health and dental benefit plans, some without any additional contribution. But health benefits aren't the only perks - you also have the option of taking advantage of free, private housing or receive a generous housing allowance. And while retirement planning may not be your number one concern upon graduation, it is another potential benefit you may want to look for in an agency.

Many travel staffing companies also offer different types of bonuses, including referral and assignment completion bonuses. These bonuses can vary from \$500 to \$5000, and in some situations possibly more.

## Preparing to be a travel nurse

There is no set answer to how much experience is needed to travel, but the general rule of thumb is a minimum of one year in your specialty area. Many facilities seeking travelers for the neo-natal intensive care unit (NICU) and labor and delivery (L&D) request a minimum of two years. Solid work references and a confident knowledge in clinical skills are also key in the decision to becoming a travel nurse.

### Your licensing matters

You will need to have the proper state license for the states where you travel. Your recruiter will help you obtain the up-to-date information and application from the appropriate state board. Twenty-two states have now joined the Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC); this means that when you take the NCLEX®-RN in a participating state, the license issued is recognized

by the other NLC states, thereby eliminating additional paperwork.

## Where to go?

First-time travelers, about 80 percent in fact, take their first assignment within the state they reside or a neighboring state that is fairly close to home.

Travel nurses don't have to travel far from their home. Local travel is usually offered near major cities where hospital needs are greater. In this case, a monthly housing subsidy may be provided in place of free, private housing along with healthcare coverage, flexible scheduling and any bonuses being offered.

Additionally, most travelers choose to use their own car to drive to their destination, which helps in transporting personal belongings. Travel reimbursements are standard for most travel agencies based on the number of miles you must travel.

## Hospitals value your contributions

Travel nursing offers flexible scheduling options that can be customized to meet a facility's specific needs and remain cost efficient. Many hospitals have learned that well-planned use of travel nurses is the secret to retaining their current staff, and in turn, promoting patient safety. Travelers are used to fill staffing gaps during situations such as seasonal tourism influxes, maternity leaves or staff shortages. Hospitals want well-qualified people who can jump in quickly (often with little orientation time) and fit in easily with the permanent team. Some hospitals even use travel nursing as a method to recruit core nurses. Travel nursing gives both the hospital and the nurse the opportunity to decide if it is a good fit.

Traveling allows you to build your résumé, sharpen your clinical skills, stay current on the latest technology, and work with hospitals that rank among the country's best according to the *U.S. News and World Report*. These opportunities

mean working side-by-side with leading healthcare professionals, which gives you the opportunity to get the hands-on training you need to stay ahead in your specialty area.



**Mary Catello**, is Director of Career Development at Cross Country TravCorps, where she's been since 1999. She spent seven years working in the Human Resources department with tenured

RNs and now works with the next generation of health professionals, educating nursing students about how to become travel nurses.