



**CIRCLE  
OF EXCELLENCE 2026**



**Kelly Kester**

**Circle of Excellence**

Kelly Kester is senior director of nursing for Heart Services at Duke University Hospital in Durham, North Carolina. She developed and implemented a prospective staffing model that reduced the use of agency nurses by 42.5% and improved ICU vacancy rates by

11.8% across health systems. Kelly is an advocate of AACN's Healthy Work Environment (HWE) initiative, and her efforts in the Cardiothoracic ICU resulted in improvements across all six HWE standards. Her leadership drove significant quality improvements, including a 35% decrease in hospital-acquired pressure injuries and sustained 0% CAUTI rates in her ICUs. Kelly has over 20 publications and annual presentations at AACN critical care meetings. She also mentors new and experienced nurse leaders. Her impact is recognized by the Duke Friends of Nursing Excellence Award and the North Carolina Great 100 Nurses award.