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Research • Advocacy • Opportunity

1801 Broadway, Suite 280
Denver, Colo. 80202
(303) 297-0456 metro Denver
(866) 283-8051 statewide
(303) 297-0460 fax

www.thebell.org

Nursing shortage a reality in Colorado It will be much worse by 2020 if college programs can't grow

By Heather McGregor

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The chronic shortage of nurses across the country could soon become an acute case in Colorado. The state's hospitals and clinics are dealing with an 11 percent vacancy rate for nursing positions — twice the national average.

Without a big expansion in nurse training programs, projected retirements will push the nursing vacancy rate to 30 percent by 2020, according to "The 2004 Colorado Nursing Faculty Supply and Demand Study," published in March 2005 by the Colorado Center for Nursing Excellence. CCNE works to develop and support the state's nursing workforce of the future.

Health care is expensive today with a moderate nursing shortage. If the decline in qualified nurses isn't reversed, wage competition will make future health care costs skyrocket.

The main reason for the nurse shortage is a parallel lack of training opportunities for new nurses. Nursing colleges are running short on faculty and on clinical internships for nursing students. In 2003, while 26 colleges and universities in Colorado graduated about 1,000 new registered nurses (RN) and licensed practical nurses (LPN), the schools turned away 2,600 aspiring nursing students.

The University of Colorado Health Sciences Center averages 700 applicants a year to its undergraduate nursing program, but can admit only 210, according to Mary Blegen, associate dean of research for the CU School of Nursing.

At Aims Community College in Greeley, 335 aspiring nurses are on the waiting list — 10 times the number of students admitted each year, according to Donna Souther, academic dean for allied health and human services.

Young people are eager to start medical careers, but there simply aren't enough professors to teach college nursing programs. At the close of the 2002-03 academic year, CCNE reported, the state's nursing training programs counted 38 faculty vacancies.

In essence, college and university nursing programs are competing for talent against the same industry they are supplying with graduates.

Colleges are running short on nursing faculty because:

- Teaching salaries can't compete with wages nurses can earn at hospitals and clinics
- Few nurses make a career move to teaching because graduate school takes so long and costs so much.
- Many nursing instructors are reaching retirement age. The average age in Colorado for top-level faculty is 53.
- Nursing faculty toil under a heavy workload, resulting in early burnout.



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Colleges also must limit enrollment because they are using around-the-clock clinical internship slots at community hospitals and clinics. Even at present levels of clinical placement, CCNE reports that some nursing school graduates are not fully prepared to begin work because they haven't gotten enough hands-on experience.

Colorado's nurse training program is designed fairly well, although tweaks are needed to improve the quality of training as well as quantity. Nursing students can take a 12-month or 18-month LPN program, start working as a nurse and continue coursework in an RN program for an associate's or bachelor's degree.

But state budget constraints on higher education are forcing cuts in some nurse training programs at the very time they should be expanding. Some colleges have raised tuition to keep their nursing programs afloat. While it's a necessary move for now, higher tuition raises the barrier for qualified applicants to start training in a much-needed profession.

That's opposite the direction Colorado should be heading.

CCNE and other medical industry leaders say Colorado must double the capacity of its nurse training programs.

The effort starts with high schools, which can encourage young people to consider careers in nursing and give students a solid grounding in math and science so they can succeed in college. But the biggest push must come at the college level. Colorado policy makers should be growing opportunities for aspiring nursing students and for nurses taking postgraduate classes who plan to teach.

Without more skilled faculty, Colorado will never catch up on its nursing shortage. Colleges need more funding to aggressively compete for nursing faculty and more innovation to expand clinical placements.

But in a rush to expand, nursing programs must emphasize depth and quality in training so nursing graduates start work with independent technical and thinking skills. After all, nurses are expected to care for patients, not just carry out tasks.

Heather McGregor is the communications director for the Bell Policy Center, a nonprofit nonpartisan progressive think tank serving Colorado. Contact her at mgregor@thebell.org

The Colorado Center for Nursing Excellence is online at www.coloradonursingcenter.org