

Nurses Taking Action - The Nursing Shortage.

An unprecedented gathering of nurses from all corners of our region will kick off the New Year and come together as problem solvers. Our region is in trouble, as are most cities, towns and regions when it comes to healthcare delivery. Nurses are vital for modern healthcare delivery, and the supply is dwindling. Early in January, nurses will be stepping in to find answers. The questions already being asked are: Will the nurses be heard? Who will have the courage to act in the best interests of the Valley? Can organizations that normally compete with each other work together for the greater good? Who will lead the charge to strengthen the RN workforce?

If you or a family member recently visited a clinic or hospital, you were probably struck with a stark realization - Registered Nurses are in short supply. Nearly one half of Oregon's registered nurses are 50 years of age or older and the proportion of older nurses has doubled in the past 20 years. Across the nation, many nurses are leaving the profession because:

- They can't deliver the caliber of care that matters.
- Bosses tell them that office, clinic, and hospital operations must remain in the black, which often translates to delivering lesser quality care than professional nurses find acceptable.
- Some feel forced to work in situations where staffing is short and they are over-extended.
- They are demoralized, exhausted, and want less stressful jobs.

Yet across this nation, many applicants to nursing school are being rejected. For every 3 applicants who apply to nursing school in Oregon, only 1 is accepted. Schools of nursing have other problems too. It is impossible to find enough nurse educators to meet the projected demand for nurses. Nurse educators are leaving jobs because:

- They are not as well paid as hospital employed nurses.
- Many are now of retirement age.
- Those who leave are not being replaced because higher wages in clinical settings lure potential nurse educators away from jobs in teaching.
- Graduate programs in nursing are not producing a large enough pool of nurse educators to meet the demand.

Nevertheless, innovations are being crafted in our own community. Local hospitals, clinics, public health agencies, federal and county facilities, and schools of nursing at RCC and OHSU are coming together to make things happen. Two years ago, nursing faculty and representatives of hospitals created a new nurse education system in which students accepted into participating community colleges are dual enrolled at OHSU. Oregon has solved a problem plaguing the rest of the country. Here, students seamlessly progress from the 2 year degree in Nursing to complete their 4 year baccalaureate Nursing studies. Faculty and curriculum are shared. Partners in this new educational roadmap also include experienced staff nurses who precept the nursing students. This extraordinary model, the first of its kind in the nation, now serves as a model for 14 other states that are eager to learn what we are doing.

The road to a stronger, healthier RN workforce is long. We know the front end of the pipeline is strong. Applicants want to come. However what remains unanswered is how to motivate nurses to stay on the job and how can we recruit enough nurse educators to keep the pipeline producing? These are some of the important questions to be raised at the upcoming Nursing Café being held at the Medford Red Lion Inn on January 9 and 15, 8 am – noon. Sponsored by the Gordon Elwood Foundation and the Jefferson Regional Health Alliance, this will prove to be an event worth watching.

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