

PULLING TOGETHER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

One of the most pressing issues for our community, state, and nation is related to the nursing shortages we are facing today and into the future. Nurses are disappearing before our eyes. Don't let this happen!

The Gordon Elwood Foundation and the Jefferson Regional Health Alliance will be sponsoring a Nursing Cafe' in Medford, Oregon, on January 9th and 15th at the Red Lion Inn.

For years articles in the press have been written about the nursing shortage and how young people are choosing other professions. In interactions with adults, both young and older, a surprising number actively consider nursing. The people I talk with and a lot of what I'm seeing indicates the road block to nursing is the limited number of nursing programs available, coupled with the limited number of student slots in those nursing programs. The nursing shortage has trickled up to the nursing schools; there simply are not enough nurse educators to fill the education void.

Over the last year, I have met several people who are giving up on the idea of nursing, not because they lack the ability or desire, indeed, they are highly intelligent and eager to serve their fellow humans in a noble profession, but because they can't wait around for years to win a nursing school lottery slot that will get them into one of the few programs available. They are making the difficult and painful choice of moving on to more readily available education and employment opportunities.

The aforementioned road block for capable, intelligent, and motivated people getting into nursing school seems to be compounding the stress and burnout rates of active nurses. Nurses in many health care settings are overworked and understaffed. Nurses are aging (average age 50) and many are either retiring or leaving the profession. These forces, our inability to educate greater numbers of nurses combined with nurses leaving the profession, for whatever reason, are creating the perfect storm for tomorrow's continued nursing shortage and a healthcare delivery crisis.

As a registered nurse, veteran, and someone who recently visited a close friend and active duty Special Forces soldier wounded in Afghanistan, I've been reflecting on the challenges of producing tomorrow's nurses and the impact the nursing shortage will have on veterans' health care.

The Veterans Health Administration is the largest integrated health care system in the United States. It includes approximately 173 medical facilities, 650 outpatient clinics, 132 nursing homes, 206 counseling centers, 73 home health care agencies, and assorted other programs. More than 5.3 million veterans a year seek medical services at Veterans Healthcare Facilities, In 2008,

approximately 263,000 veterans in the VHA system will have returned from the Global War on Terror, many of them with grievous physical wounds, PTSD, and other mental health issues. This new generation of veterans as well as the aging veterans of past generations will require educated and highly motivated nurses to meet the healthcare challenges confronted by the VHA.

The Nursing shortage is a complex problem with no easy answers. Unless the collective imagination of nurse leaders and legislators coming together in a spirit of collegiality to problem solve this issue occurs, quality healthcare for veterans will remain at risk.

We are working with the community for change. “Join the discussion in January.”

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