

NEWS



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Hospitals Challenged to Meet Rising Demand for Medical Care *Key Positions Difficult to Fill, Shortages Loom in Many Others*

MADISON (February 13, 2008) ----- Wisconsin hospitals report it is increasingly difficult to recruit the number and type of employees that they need to fill specific vacant positions. A situation they fear will get worse if a remedy is not applied soon.

A new report released this week by the Wisconsin Hospital Association (WHA) says in 2004 there were 287,000 people working in health care in Wisconsin. By 2014 it is predicted that more than 350,000 individuals will be needed to meet the demand for health care by an aging population. Meeting that demand for workers is proving to be a challenge now to hospitals, educational facilities, and state government policymakers. To complicate the situation further, the rate of chronic disease is rising as people live longer, fueling demand for medical services at the same time large numbers of hospital employees reach retirement age.

WHA Vice President of Workforce Judy Warmuth, author of the report, said competition among industries will escalate for the "twenty somethings," which has caused hospitals to already take steps to attract middle and high school students and keep older workers they already employ.

"Hospitals are changing the physical environment of care to accommodate their older workers, designing more flexible employee benefit programs to keep and attract employees, and redesigning the role of workers within the health care delivery system all in an effort to meet the demand for care that they are now experiencing," according to Warmuth. She cautioned that despite these efforts, serious workforce shortages are on the horizon.

Pharmacy, Physical Therapy Positions Hard to Fill

Wisconsin hospitals employ nearly 30,000 nurses. The sheer number of nurse vacancies open at any one time suggests they are the most difficult to fill. However, the number of nurses available to fill entry-level positions is considered adequate at this time. In fact, hospitals report that pharmacist and physical therapist positions are topping the list as being hardest to fill. The supply of these professionals could be affected by the fact that both of these occupations now require a clinical doctorate degree for entry into the profession, which requires more than five years of academic work. The commitment of time and the additional cost of these degrees could affect the number of students that are interested in entering these occupations. While there are many nurses in hospitals, there are far fewer pharmacists and physical therapists. Even one unfilled position for a pharmacist in a hospital can reduce access to care and delay response times.

Currently there is only one School of Pharmacy in Wisconsin at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. However, Concordia University recently announced that it plans to open a pharmacy

program with a goal to begin enrolling students in the fall of 2008. UW-Milwaukee has announced that it will expand the physical therapy program with a goal of graduating an additional 25 physical therapists per year. However, Warmuth said if the demand for health care continues to grow at projected rates, there are no assurances that these efforts alone will supply the workforce necessary to meet the demand for health care.

Hospital Workforce Salary Costs Escalate

While the fact that hospitals are hiring more and more workers is good news for job seekers and the state's economy, there is a downside. Hospitals report that costs related to keeping and training a workforce are now nearly 50 percent of their total expenses. Shortages are driving up salaries in key occupations. The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development identified four occupations as having above-average wages for their educational group, which included: experienced pharmacists, \$51 per hour; experienced physical therapists and registered nurses, \$30 per hour; and, experienced radiologic technologists at \$25 per hour.

WHA President Steve Brenton said controlling the increases in health care costs is directly tied to how hospitals manage the complexity of their workforce issues.

"Unlike other industries where advances in technology can often replace people, in health care nearly the opposite is true. The specialized technology and equipment that are necessary to deliver the best possible care require highly-skilled specialists," Brenton said. "We are treating and curing diseases that just a few years ago were claiming lives, but these life-saving technologies that often did not exist just a few years ago require people to deliver them, and that comes at a cost," he added.

Hospitals Take Actions to Stem Rising Tide of Workforce Shortages

Hospitals now have a significant percentage of workers who are older than 55. Predicting when health care workers will retire has become a necessity. One effort to predict the timing of health care retirements has been initiated by the Fox Valley Healthcare Workforce Alliance. Supported by the Fox Valley Workforce Investment Board, the Alliance surveyed 8,000 health care employees to determine their retirement intentions. With that information, they are able to more accurately predict the number, type and timing of positions that will be available due to retirements. Plans are in place for similar surveys in La Crosse, Madison, Milwaukee and Central Wisconsin. This is the type of data that will allow educational facilities to anticipate the demand for faculty and space in occupational programs.

Older workers bring vast experience to the workforce, but as they age, they also experience limitations, including their ability to lift, shift and move patients. Obesity in the patient population has made this even more difficult. Hospitals have started to more widely use equipment specifically designed to move patients, which has led to fewer work-related employee injuries and improved patient safety.

Planning Now Could Avert Severe Shortages Later

Workforce shortages are difficult to eliminate, but planning and acting now could avert some of the more serious shortages now reported in other states. WHA recommends several specific actions that must be taken, which include:

- Address specific shortages. Capacity in programs that train pharmacists and physical therapists must be increased now to catch up with the current demand.
- Closely monitor the supply of registered nurses. While hospitals are “holding their own” on nurses now, according to Warmuth, shortages loom. While Wisconsin’s nursing programs have done an admirable job of increasing capacity, those gains will be quickly lost if the shortage of nurse faculty and clinical sites that are essential to the training programs are not addressed.
- Educational facilities need data to plan for and prepare an increasing number of workers. While groups in some parts of the state are gathering workforce data related to when workers will retire, more and better data will be needed to wisely allocate resources.
- Hospitals must take steps to recruit and retain their older workers. Adaptations in the physical work environment, including patient lift-assist equipment, physical layouts that require less walking and standing, and better lighting must be incorporated into hospital design. Changes in employee benefits that encourage older workers to stay at work and serve as mentors to new employees must be considered. Flexible schedules and part-time work opportunities are attractive to older workers and can also serve as a recruitment tool for new employees.

END

MEDIA: Attached is a summary of specific actions being taken in your local area that illustrate how hospitals are attracting, recruiting and retaining employees. The local contact person for each program listed below follows the description.

Link to report: <http://www.wha.org/Workforce/2007WorkforceReport.aspx>