



States seek remedies to workforce shortages in health care

by Mike Murphy
for Stateline Midwest

With demand for health care growing as their populations age, Midwestern states are seeking to avert a potential shortage of health care professionals that could severely restrict access to life-saving care.

Some parts of the region already are dealing with labor shortages in this industry, while others are preparing for the consequences associated with the retirement of the baby boomer generation: an increased demand for services and a potentially smaller pool of health care professionals.

Although a major part of the shortfall is expected to occur in nursing, there also will be a need to fill positions in other fields, ranging from nursing assistants and laboratory technicians to educators of health care professionals. The U.S. Department of Labor has estimated that the health care industry will grow at a rate of 28 percent between 2002 and 2012.

The good news is that this increase would translate into 3.5 million new jobs in health care-related fields, and policymakers are now studying ways to make sure future openings can be filled by qualified professionals.

In Michigan, where health care already is the largest industry in terms of employment, with nearly 700,000 jobs directly or indirectly related to the field, Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm recently appointed Jeanette Klemczak as the state's first chief nursing executive. She is expected to lead Michigan's effort to attract, recruit and retain health care workers in the state.

"None of these things has a simple answer, but we can't wait much longer," Klemczak says.

According to estimates in her state, Michigan will have 100,000 new health care jobs to fill over the next decade.

"I think a crisis will be averted, just because the issue has so much visibility," Klemczak says. "The government will not do it all. It will also require cooperation from hospitals and nursing homes."

States already have been exploring and experimenting with various ways to expand the pool of health care workers. In Michigan, for instance, a partnership between state agencies and health groups is educating middle and high school students about careers in health care.

Another option states are pursuing is to offer financial incentives and assistance to students who agree to work in parts of the state with an acute need for health care workers. A program established in 2002 by the South Dakota Legislature provides as much as \$5,000 to nurses who make a two-year commitment to work in mostly rural areas of the state.

"Now, there's no shortage in the populated areas of the state," explains Rep. Jean Hunhoff, a Republican from Yankton who is a registered nurse, hospital administrator and corporate quality-compliance officer for an acute care facility. "But if you look at the rest of the state, there are shortages."

The cost of the incentive program is split between health care providers and the state; payments are now being made to 48 nurses practicing in 22 South Dakota counties. In 2003, lawmakers decided to expand the program to include other health care professions.

"You go to a community and work and get \$5,000 to pay off loans from going to school; it's a way to get a commitment out of the individuals," Hunhoff says.

She believes an aging workforce and increased specialization in the nursing field are contributing to shortages in parts of her state. According to Klemczak, another problem is the general perception of nursing.

"We've got to change the culture," Klemczak says. "A lot of people who enter into the nursing field are looked down upon."

A lack of understanding about the profession's rewards and opportunities also is hampering recruitment and retention efforts.

According to a recent national poll conducted at Vanderbilt University, most people are unaware that nursing salaries match favorably with many other professions or that this career path offers many job opportunities beyond traditional patient care.

Getting a handle on the numbers

As it tries to address current and future workforce shortages in health care, Klemczak says, the state must be sure it has good data on the industry. A report done by the Michigan Center for Nursing and a study conducted for two Michigan agencies are recent examples of how the state is trying to collect

this information.

In 2004, the Center for Nursing surveyed the state's registered nurses (RNs) and licensed practical nurses (LPNs). It found that approximately 17 percent of practicing RNs are 55 or older, compared to 11 percent in 1992-'93. Nearly a quarter of the LPNs are 55 or older. This aging of the nursing population in Michigan is consistent with national trends.

The Michigan survey also notes that "it is not just the nurses nearing retirement age who are planning to stop practicing nursing in the near future." More than 30 percent of the state's RNs and LPNs plan to stay in the profession for only one to 10 more years.

A study by the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth and Department of Community Health estimates that health care jobs in the state will increase by 100,000 over the next 10 years.

Forty percent of that increased demand will be for registered nurses, but the study also forecasts needs in many other fields. Future high-demand areas include occupational and physical therapists, pharmacists, radiographers, laboratory technicians, diagnostic sonographers, paramedics and health information technicians.

The study also makes a series of recommendations, such as:

- an evaluation of the capacity of health care career education programs in Michigan to meet anticipated needs and shortages;
- the use of newly created supply-and-demand forecasts, occupational profiles and a database of model practices to help local workforce investment boards add health care workers in specific parts of the state; and
- the commission of an ongoing statewide survey that provides information on health care workforce vacancies, turnover and anticipated needs among health care employers.

"Michigan's population aged 65 and older will grow by 25 percent, from 1.2 million in 2000 to an estimated 1.5 million by 2015, and it is well known that the demand for health care services grows as the population ages," says David Hollister, director of the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth.

He adds that growth in this job sector will create "some exciting career opportunities in the very near future to replace well-paid manufacturing jobs that have been lost in Michigan."

The challenge for the state, as well its health care industry and education institutions, is to make sure skilled individuals are available to take these positions. 



The retirement of the baby boomer generation has many policymakers concerned about future workforce shortages in the health care industry.