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Have a degree? You could be a nurse in a year

May 21, 2007

BY SUZANNE MELLON

When we or one of our loved ones need medical care, whether in a hospital, long-term facility or home setting, we have an expectation that it will be provided with a level of excellence by a registered nurse.

But that expectation is not a guarantee for the future, because of an acute nursing shortage. We should all care about this issue because it contributes to quality of care and patient safety.

Recent projections estimate that Michigan will need an additional 18,000 nurses by 2015, and while Gov. Jennifer Granholm has established the Michigan Nurse Corps to train more educators and graduate more nurses in the next three years, additional attention to this issue is needed. Resolving the nursing shortage will require the collective effort of stakeholders at the national, state and local levels.

Programs such as the one at the University of Detroit Mercy's McAuley School of Nursing can accept more students only with the availability of more nursing educators, facilities and clinical placement opportunities. Because nursing schools have not been able to increase their capacity enough to keep pace with demand, more than 32,000 qualified students were turned away from programs across the country last year, including more than 4,000 potential students

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in Michigan.

According to a recent study by the Michigan Center for Nursing, 42% of full-time faculty are 55 or older, with 19% expected to retire in the next five years. The overall vacancy rate for full-time faculty positions in nursing education programs is 7% -- 50 out of 697 positions -- while the vacancy rate for adjunct faculty positions is 6% -- 54 out of 871.

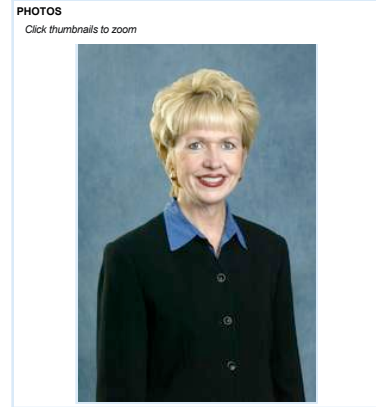
In addition to the governor's plan for the Michigan Nurse Corps, deans and directors of community colleges and universities, along with nurse executives throughout the state, have been working with Michigan's chief nurse executive to address the shortage by increasing faculty, partnering to increase the educational level of nurses, and improving access to clinical sites.

Strategies include increasing accelerated nursing programs for individuals with other degrees to transition into the profession. At University of Detroit Mercy, we have increased capacity to admit 80 second-degree students who will graduate with a nursing degree in one year. We also are forming alliances with hospitals and other clinical sites to address scholarship support or tuition forgiveness for students and to provide clinical faculties.

But larger and bolder investments are needed to increase capacity in all our nursing programs. Strong collaborations among educators, health care professionals, policy makers and community stakeholders are essential to increase nursing faculty that will result in the number of nurses we need to provide high-quality health care to the residents of our state.

SUZANNE MELLON is a registered nurse and the dean of the College of Health Professions and McAuley School of Nursing at University of Detroit Mercy. Write to her in care of the Free Press Editorial Page or via e-mail at

oped@freepress.com.



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