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## Demand for health care help booming

**Michigan industry offers stable option in shaky economy as hospitals grow desperate to fill critical shortages**

BY PATRICIA ANSTETT • FREE PRESS MEDICAL WRITER • DECEMBER 28, 2008

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Michigan's health care industry, the state's largest employer, desperately needs thousands of workers to fill jobs with critical shortages.

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That may include you -- autoworkers, social workers, accountants, computer technicians and others laid off in one of the nation's worst recessions.

As jobs evaporate, the health care industry remains a field with job growth, benefits and, usually, stability.

"It's a very strong forecast for health care for a long time to come," said Andy Levin, deputy director of Michigan's Department of Labor and Economic Growth.

But as word has spread, many college health programs are full, the Free Press found in interviews with state labor forecasters, job bank coordinators, hospital human resource officials and deans of community colleges and four-year degree programs.

Now, just to get into a college program, students may first need to take online or community college courses, or volunteer to get health care experience, educators and hospital officials suggest.

"The problem is that so many people decided health care would be a great thing to get into right now that they have overloaded our education system; there are waiting lists," said Carole Stacy, director of the Michigan Center for Nursing, part of the nonprofit Michigan Health Council.

But once accepted into a training program, many fields offer graduates a choice of positions, both in Michigan and around the country.

More than a dozen health care fields are in particularly high demand. "We call them critical occupations here," said Barb Medvec, senior vice president and nursing officer at Oakwood Healthcare in Dearborn. "In many of these fields, we have vacancies."

Besides doctors and nurses, fields with the greatest shortages include pharmacists and pharmacy

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technicians, technologists and technicians of all kinds, and a wide range of therapists in physical and occupational therapy.

The shortages exist all over the country, fueled by retirements and an aging health care workforce, a growing number of older Americans and technology advances that demand more specialized workers.

By 2016, jobs for health care practitioners and technical workers such as nurses and physical therapists will grow 15% to 283,390 jobs, according to the Michigan labor and economic growth department.

Health care support positions, a category that includes a wide range of medical assistance help, will increase 20% to 164,500 positions, the department says.

Overall, Michigan's health care industry now directly employs 472,300 people, more than Michigan's agricultural and automotive manufacturing sectors, the department says.

"We need people very badly" in critically-short fields, said Andrea Ferrario, director of talent acquisition for St. John Health in Warren.

The system, which laid off 300 people earlier this year in nonclinical care areas, needs people in a dozen areas, including nurses with specialty training, pharmacists and pharmacy technicians and others.

"We just opened a new hospital" in Novi and "we need to maintain employment at all the rest" of the system's hospitals, she said.

### Something for everyone

Experts suggest calling a hospital or visiting its Web site's career pages, then following up with interviews with hospital job recruiters.

Not all hospital jobs require training or an interest in science. Others, such as radiology technician positions, may be good for autoworkers who enroll in two-year training programs, said Deloris Hunt, vice president of human resources for the Detroit Medical Center.

Another possible fit for people with manufacturing or business backgrounds might be a position in patient financial services, which provides benefits and \$10- to \$15-an-hour wages and requires no prior health care training, Ferrario said.

In January, St. John plans an event to try to find jobs within the St. John system for laid-off family members of current St. John workers. It also gives bonuses of as much as \$2,000 to any St. John staffer who helps recruit a person to a critically short field, if the recruited worker stays with the health system at least six months.

The Detroit Medical Center has a similar program that pays \$2,000 to \$5,000 to staffers who refer people for critically short jobs.

Charlene McPeak, dean of health and human services at Macomb Community College, encouraged people to volunteer in health care to boost their chances of getting into a training program.

The school's physical therapy assistant program accepted 32 people last year among 250 applicants. Those with the highest grades and test scores had the best chances of getting in, along with those who had 40 hours of experience in the field, she said. Some volunteer just to get the requirement in.

### Prospects after graduation

Already, graduates in critically short fields often finish school with good prospects.

"Our students pretty routinely are considering two to three serious job offers on graduation," said Rose Higgins, clinical coordinator of the University of Detroit-Mercy physician assistant program.

Last year, more than 500 students applied for 40 positions in the program.

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Jobs for physician assistants -- who work under a doctor's supervision to provide a wide range of medical care -- have grown in the University of Michigan Health System in five years, increasing from 52 to 177 today, said Marc Moote, chief physician assistant with the health system.

Though the average annual wage for a physician assistant in Michigan is \$79,240, specialists in the field can earn as much as \$150,000 a year in areas such as cardiovascular medicine, Moote said.

"The demand continues to exceed the available supply," he said.

Once in health care, some advance further by getting a second degree.


Anna Kostaroff, a registered nurse for nearly 30 years, returned in 2003 to Madonna University for a master's degree in hospice and palliative studies, a field caring for terminally ill patients at home and in hospitals.

"It's an open field for people in social work, chaplaincies and nursing," she said.

Contact **PATRICIA ANSTETT** at [panstett@freepress.com](mailto:panstett@freepress.com).

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**digoburish** wrote:

Wow! As an automaker who will be soon laid off, I thought the article was encouraging. But, when I take into account all of the pending layoffs in the medical field, the influx of students trying to break in, and the scores of people who are losing medical benefits in this foresakened economy, the future outlook is grim at best. I feel the article is not only misleading, it's irresponsible. So do me and the thousands of other soon-to-be and current out of work Michiganders a favor. Level with us and write something that more believable and enlightening.

12/31/2008 11:27:45 a.m. EDT

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**sps1971** wrote:

I would like to know that this reporter and her sources are smoking. The Health industry is not the place to be. First off, if lay offs continue and people don't have health benefits anymore that means no one will come to the hospital unless its an absolute emergency. Until jobs are created and the economy turns around there is no job safe.

Most of the jobs that are in high demand, you need a college degree. Just like nursing. What about a Pharnasist that is a 6 year degree. Like I said I would like to know what this reporter and her sources where smoke or what cloud they were on when they wrote this article.

I work at a local hospital and patient studies have drop dramatically. It's unfortunate that the hospital administrators kept increasing projected patient numbers despite all of the lay offs. Where is the common sense.

12/29/2008 8:06:12 p.m. EDT

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**FarEast** wrote:

Replying to dave6921:



*To all the people arguing about unions, Toledo St.Vs is represented by UAW and the care did suffer , I dont know if it was management or unions fault , but there was definitely a difference in care after organizing.*

What was that again?

Once again,,a little louder, please! Some people didn't hear you the first or the second time.

12/28/2008 9:10:08 p.m. EDT

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**Sapphire1991** wrote:

Though I'm not a fan of the UAW, the killer benefits that these companies provide also provide jobs for many in the health care industry. As these benefits start to erode, there will be less demand for health care workers, especially any decent paying jobs. Already, medical assistants making \$12 an hour are doing much of the work that higher paying nurses once did. Physician Assistants are doing work that physicians used to do at a fraction of the cost. Most of the health care jobs discussed in the article are \$15/hr jobs or less. They also don't mention the cost involved in going back to school, how to support a family while going to school full time and how to actually go to school when the wait lists go on for years. It also didn't discuss the recently averted layoffs at Beaumont and other facilities. Not a very well written article.

12/28/2008 9:08:05 p.m. EDT

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**metromix** wrote:

Interesting article on Yahoo Finance.com " Hospitals ill from bad debt, credit woes".

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