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No shortage of students, just nursing faculty

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An acute shortage of experienced, registered nurses in Western Massachusetts is threatening the quality of patient care even though there is an abundance of qualified students who want to become nurses.

Why? A shortage of nursing faculty at area colleges causes at least 300 students to be turned away every year.

Massachusetts is one of 40 states that faces both a current and future shortage of nurses, according to a recent report by the Trust for America's Health. But a major new initiative is offering a prescription for change that has already yielded results.

In shorthand, it is simply known as the "CAN DO" partnership, a collaborative effort of more than a dozen health-care and educational institutions as well as the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation and the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County Inc.

More than 60 potential nursing students have already expressed interest in a pilot STAR program designed to recruit and support 10 bachelor prepared nurses in master's or doctoral programs with the expectation that they become nursing faculty.

The two-year project, entitled Collaborating for the Advancement of Nursing: Developing Opportunities (CAN DO) is part of a national program, known as Partners Investing in Nursing's Future led by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Northwest Health Foundation. The program seeks to encourage local foundations and their regional partners to act as catalysts in developing grassroots strategies to address the nursing shortage.

Many of the region's health-care providers and colleges are involved in this innovative project to address a nursing shortage that exists nationwide but which is particularly severe in our community.

In 2006, 588 vacancies existed for registered nurses in the Pioneer Valley - a 9 percent vacancy rate - and in 10 years, the commonwealth is projected to have a 21 percent vacancy rate.

The shortage of nurses is not a new problem, but it is one which requires a proactive partnership to cure. Among local partners in this effort are Baystate Health System and SPHS Mercy Medical Center in Springfield, Cooley Dickinson Hospital in Northampton, Noble Hospital in Westfield and Genesis Healthcare/Heritage Hall in Agawam. Academic institutions include the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Elms College, American International College and Holyoke, Springfield Technical and Greenfield community

colleges.

The CAN DO partners are collectively working to create a seamless nursing educational advancement system that not only increases the region's capacity to train nurses but also educates them to provide high quality, culturally relevant health care to a rapidly aging, diverse population. The Star program is one of two pilots designed to inform the partnership's strategic planning process.

Nurses seeking master's and doctoral degrees frequently do not look like your typical graduate student. On average, they are women over 45 years of age who have been out of college for 15 or more years, need to continue working to support their families, and subsequently take longer to complete their degrees.

The CAN DO partners addressed those needs with a program that allowed for flexible work schedules and teaching opportunities so students can support themselves while completing their academic program.

With funding from the State Office of Workforce Development coupled with employer-based educational programs such as tuition reimbursement, the STAR program seeks to cover a significant portion of each student's tuition and fees which are typically over \$20,000 for a master's program.

The program also will match students with either an employer or academic -based mentor to provide ongoing support during the first year of graduate education. In return, STAR students will teach in one of the region's nursing programs for at least one semester while in school and consider teaching in the region upon completion of their graduate education.

Already nurses in the region have enthusiastically responded to the Star pilot program.

The interest of more than 60 qualified individuals for only 10 available slots demonstrates the need for such a program. With additional financial and institutional resources as well as state-level policy changes, a sustained Star program in the region could dramatically impact the nursing faculty shortage and, as a result, the larger nursing workforce shortage.

The Davis Foundation and the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County are both committed to working with the region's health-care providers and academic institutions to ensure that we have a prepared nursing workforce. Efforts like the CAN DO partnership and the Star pilot program are necessary to ensure that we have enough nurses to care for patients.

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