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Demand high for nurses

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By Eve Hightower/Appeal-Democrat

A nursing shortage has hospitals and clinics beckoning nurses back to work.

By the time today's X-generationers start retiring, the state could be short more than 122,000 qualified nurses, according to a University of California, San Francisco study.

When hospitals fail to meet staffing requirements, they direct patients elsewhere.

"Clearly, this is a very difficult situation," said Mike Wiltermood, chief operating officer for Fremont-Rideout Health Group. "There are times patients may be diverted to other hospitals."

This is an increasingly common practice.

"That's been going on for years," Wiltermood added.

In an effort to help Mid-Valley medical centers meet a growing need, Sutter County One-Stop is offering nurses a refresher course, beginning Monday and running through March 31. It is the fourth class Sutter County One-Stop has offered, said Bobby Chima, the One-Stop's business and workforce specialist. About 95 percent of graduates return to work.

"They know there's a shortage and they feel obligated to come back," said Pam Mahmoudi, who will teach the class.

One nurse had been out of the field for 28 years, she added.

Hospitals in rural areas have a hard time competing with the allure of big cities. Colusa Regional Medical Center also used to recruit from overseas, but found few nurses stick around after they had fulfilled contracts which specified a minimum amount of time they had to work for the hospital that helped bring them to the U.S., said Katherine Hughes, the center's chief nursing officer.

"We get them here. They live out their contracts, and then move on," she said.

Green pastures just don't compare to what nurse-staffing firms are offering elsewhere, like temporary residence in a mansion or \$200 gift cards simply to check out a hospital.

A California law implemented two years ago mandating there be at least one nurse for every four to six patients depending on the ward has recruiters on their knees.

One agency promises to make their nurses stars via reality television. "Laguna Beach" follows six nurses from around the country for 13 weeks as they work and play in sunny Southern California city while living in a swank \$10 million mansion.

"We also need to encourage nurses at hospitals to stay and continue their education," said Mahmoudi, who has been in the field for 41 years.

Mahmoudi is in an increasingly sought after group of nurses willing to teach.

While the medical field vies for energetic high school and college graduates' attention, training programs are struggling to find nurses qualified to teach the programs because schools cannot afford to pay teachers what hospitals pay.

California nurses are the highest paid in the U.S., averaging \$33.25 per hour. Not including perks for things like working undesirable shifts, Fremont-Rideout nurses make \$30 to \$40 an hour, Wiltermood said. The hospital also tries to keep nurses by offering good benefits, a comfortable work environment and flexible schedules without compromising patients' needs or losing money, Wiltermood added.

Hospitals statewide routinely post losses, according to the California Healthcare Foundation. In 2004, more than half of California's hospitals lost money. But they continue to shell out cash trying to recruit and retain nurses.

Finding staff is becoming even more critical as baby boomers age and require more care. The average nurse was born during the boom, which means retirement is fast approaching.

Those two dynamics have recruiter quaking.

"In the past we've been able to raise pay and entice nurses out of retirement," Wiltermood said.

Hughes, who has been in the field for 35 years, said that is not going to work forever.

"It's going to be difficult," she said.

There is still space in the One-Stop refresher course for more students, Chima said. Eleven people had signed up for it as of Friday.

There is no charge for licensed nurses interested in taking advantage of the One-Stop refresher course.

For more information about the course and an upcoming career fair go to www.sutteronestop.com, or call 822-5120. The center is located at 256 Wilbur Avenue in Yuba City.

"If you've been out of work for more than two years, hospitals will require you to take a course," Chima said.

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