

# State short of training for needed nurses

By Linda Tieman, RN, MN, FACHE

Washington state is approaching its worst nursing shortage ever. Every county feels the effects — in your local hospital emergency department, medical office, long-term care facility, or at your child's school.

State legislators and decision-makers face tough decisions. Cuts will have to be made, but compromising the future of nursing in our state is not a viable solution. We have the opportunity to fill these high-quality jobs while maintaining and improving the health of the entire state.

Right now, we have an odd situation where some nurses are having trouble finding the job they want, because our economy is stagnant. At the same time, as our economy improves, we will see nurses who've delayed retirement leave the work force. Health care reform will make health care available to almost 300,000 more people in Washington, and last year

many baby boomers became eligible for Medicare. These changes mean more demand for nurses.

Currently, there are 2,300 registered nursing vacancies in Washington, according to the Washington State Department of Labor. Imagine, 2,300 open positions waiting to be filled in today's economy. Why are there so many vacancies? Part of the answer stems from gaps in the educational sector. Programs at private colleges, the UW, WSU and state community colleges, including Clark College, prepare our nursing graduates to fill these critical positions. In recent years, every college in Washington has had to turn away student nurse applicants because the educational system hasn't had the capacity to admit them. To add to the problem, budget cuts threaten already struggling state educational programs.

There is hope. In early 2008, the Washington Center for Nursing submitted the Master Plan for Nursing Education to the Washington State Department of Health. The plan is designed to transform nursing

education in our state. At its foundation is extensive research conducted statewide with nurses, nurse educators and others within the profession. The research tells a story of an educational system in need — one that is struggling to graduate enough nurses to meet the demand.

## Sound solutions

Offering solutions, proposals in the Master Plan include enhancing the ability of Washington nurses and nursing students to pursue their education. Proposals to deal with the shortage of faculty include raising faculty salaries, diversifying faculty recruitment efforts, promoting mentoring, and providing additional teaching resources to new faculty. Cutting critical funding will dampen efforts to implement these recommendations and hinder Washington's ability to build the future of health care.

We all expect to receive quality care when we need it. Without exceptional educational programs, supplying a qualified nursing work

force is near impossible. With the aging nursing work force, aging baby boomers, and more people having access to care, the already unmet need will get worse.

If nothing changes by 2020, 30,000 registered nurse openings are expected. To meet this demand, graduation rates would need to increase by 400 per year, every year, for 15 years. To give some perspective, Clark College graduates about 144 students a year, with a number of those continuing on at WSUV in the BSN program. WSUV graduates about 35 master's students each year.

At a time when the economy is struggling and people are losing jobs, nursing is a profession that offers stable employment. Supporting educational programs will not only ensure the future of nursing and health care in Washington but it can stimulate our economy in a time of need. Now is the time for lawmakers to invest in higher education nursing programs. Budget cuts today mean fewer nurses to care for our population in need — a population that grows larger with each passing day.

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LINDA TIEMAN is executive director of the Washington Center for Nursing in Seattle ([www.wacenterfornursing.org](http://www.wacenterfornursing.org)).