

Medical success spelled C-O-L-L-A-B-O-R-A-T-I-O-N

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YOUNGSTOWN - Although there are now over 20,000 health care workers employed in Columbiana, Mahoning and Trumbull counties, according to the Ohio Bureau of Labor Market Information, medical providers in these three counties expect employee shortages by 2008, as more than 8,000 new jobs are created.

With these numbers in mind, area health care providers, educators, and government officials met Tuesday to discuss the challenges of attracting, educating and retaining quality employees. "The Challenge of Change: Building a Blueprint for a 21st Century Workforce" was the theme of the Mahoning Valley Regional Healthcare Workforce Summit held on the Youngstown State University campus.

The conference opened with a panel discussion aimed at pinpointing the difficulties area hospitals, nursing homes, physicians offices and other health care providers face in attracting new employees and retaining the quality employees they now have.

The panelists suggested cooperation was needed not only within the health care industry but also between hospitals and educational institutions to ensure a reliable source of quality, skilled employees. Salem Community Hospital President and CEO Howard Rohleder suggested that collaboration, which has occurred in the past, could even start before high school.

"One of the places that we have an opportunity to collaborate more is... getting to the high school and possibly even the junior high school level to have people identify health care as an area of interest very early before they make other career decisions," Rohleder said.

However, Melvin Creeley, president and CEO of East Liverpool City Hospital, pointed out hospitals in competition with one another for patients and skilled employees must still cooperate with one another, sharing their limited resources with one another, to attract people to the field.

As an example, Creeley referred to the training partnership between the two Columbiana County hospitals. While the training facilities for nursing exist in East Liverpool, he said, some of those students receive on-site training at Salem. Likewise, students in radiology programs, housed at Salem, receive on-site training in East Liverpool.

"The key to getting people into the field earlier and interesting them in health careers is a topic that is being debated nationwide right now, and no one seems to have the silver bullet to that," Creeley said.

Following the panel discussions, the estimated 225 summit participants separated into team work sessions that focused on finding solutions to the problems of attracting, developing and retaining quality employees.

Some of these suggestions included developing a collaboration between potential employees and health care providers, to identify funding sources for training, and developing recognition programs for workers already in the field, to commend those employees for their skill and hard work.

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