

Hospital Paying Bonuses to Attract and Keep People

By Larry Ringler, Tribune Chronicle

When it comes to finding enough health care workers in the next five years, the Mahoning Valley's condition report is serious.

To keep the situation from becoming critical, health care leaders in Trumbull, Mahoning, and Columbiana counties will meet Tuesday at the Mahoning Valley Regional Healthcare Workforce Summit at Youngstown State University.

The summit also will include educators, job search agencies, pharmacies, ambulance companies and others with the mission of attracting, training, and keeping enough health care workers to meet the growing needs of an aging population.

"We see the necessity to take the initiative now to expand the workforce in areas where we see some pretty severe shortages," said Paul Carlson, senior vice president of human resources for Forum Health, one of the area's two major hospital systems.

The summit could be a blueprint for similar get-togethers focused on needs in other key Valley industries, officials said.

"Our hope is we could tackle manufacturing and information technology. Those are two obvious ones next," said Karla Krodell, spokeswoman in YSU's Public Service Institute.

"We've discussed with partners that if it works well, we would look at expanding it to other industries that are important to the Mahoning Valley," said Reid Dulberger, the Youngstown/Warren Regional Chamber's executive vice president of community development.

The current shortage of health care means employers must sweeten the pot with competitive wages, signing bonuses and other perks to get and keep workers.

Carlson said Forum Health gives workers signing bonuses of \$2,500 to \$3,000, depending on the profession and education. Starting pay for registered nurses, respiratory therapists or medical technologists is \$35,000 to \$40,000, he said.

"The old adage that health care professionals aren't compensated has pretty much fallen by the wayside," he said, but added, "The problem is everyone is doing it. We said we'd better sit down and find a collaborative approach" to enlarging the pool of workers instead of luring employees from each other.

Forum Health could hire 100 to 150 registered nurses in the next 12 to 18 months, largely due to retirements, said Carlson, who himself plans to retire in a month. The hospital system will need 24 to 40 radiologists to take X-rays or give CAT scans, he added.

“Over the next two to five years we’ll have significant number of retirements. We have to get people in place and trained,” he said.

Training for technical jobs such as surgical nurses costs about one year’s salary, said YSU’s Krodel.

Surgical nurses average about \$46,000 a year, she said, citing from the report “Healthcare at the Crossroads” from the Joint Commission Public Policy Initiative. Assuming a turnover rate of 20 percent, which is the current average, a hospital employing 600 nurses will spend \$4.52 million per year to replace nurses who leave, she said.

But money isn’t the sole factor for keeping health care workers, Krodel said.

“That’s a factor, but it’s usually near the bottom of the list. When you talk to employees, they want recognition. They want people to use their ideas,” she said.

Krodel cited a nurse’s aide who heard a speaker saying painting dark spots on the floor would keep Alzheimer’s patients from walking off. The aide asked the janitor to paint black on the floor, and people stopped wandering away, she said.

Michael Piros, director of Adult Education for the Trumbull County Technical Center, said jobseekers are catching on to the idea they can get work in health care. He said programs at the TCTC Adult Education Center in Lordstown have seen increasing enrollment in the last several years.

“We have five programs, and they’re all full,” he said. “We’re an economically disadvantaged area with a high unemployment rate, but the newspaper want ads show there’s huge help-wanted in the medical area.”

The school offers adult programs for licensed practical nurses, medical assistants, and patient care technology, medical transcription and health unit coordinators. Students include recent high school graduates, older people looking for work after their children left home, and people seeking new careers after their employer closed, Piros said.

Warren’s Kathy Slater, for instance, spent eight years in retail but now is taking medical office management training at the TCTC center. With her children graduated, she said she wanted to put the “people skills” she honed in retail to work in a field that she finds more rewarding.

“I see this as something I can finish out my working life,” she said.

Her training will enable her to complete daily logs, ledgers, patient payments and treatments. A medical assistant also can take clinical training to give injections, draw blood and do catherizations.

The key to her chosen field, Slater said, is the capacity to care for others.