

Nurse Shortage Reaches Crisis Proportions

To the editor:

Connecticut's nursing homes, hospitals and home care services are among the best in the nation. However, the state's current nursing shortage threatens the quality of care we have come to expect from our health care facilities and will reach crisis proportions if not immediately addressed.

Nurse vacancy rates in Connecticut are up 50 percent since 1995. More than 3,200 nurses have left the state or given up licenses since 1996. Three of the state's nursing schools closed in recent years. The remaining schools graduated 616 Registered Nurse candidates this year, down from 915 in 1996.

Connecticut residents who have loved ones in nursing homes and hospitals, receiving round-the-clock care, and those receiving home care visits from nurses, know that care is delivered with the highest degrees of professionalism and care, through sometimes difficult circumstances.

Nursing home facilities like the 360-bed Jewish Home for the Elderly (JHE) in Fairfield have addressed the issue by hiring nine nurses from the Philippines. The JHE continues to advertise, and has also created a JHE-funded scholarship program for Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) at Bullard Havens in Bridgeport. Four of the JHE's CNAs have already graduated and four more will soon begin this 14-month course to become Licensed Practical Nurses.

But this is not enough.

Today, there are 43,399 licensed registered nurses in Connecticut and their average age is 48 – three years older than the national average. Many of these professionals are expected to retire within the next four years. We must work together to find solutions to filling the vacancies created by these retirements.

To alleviate this crisis, Connecticut lawmakers and health care providers must immediately join together in a public-private partnership to find and enact solutions to recruit, train and retain health care workers – or the sick and elderly of our society will not get the care they need and deserve.

Fifteen years ago, Connecticut was one of the first states in the nation to deal with the teacher shortage, and a similar effort is needed now to deal with the nursing shortage. The state, hospitals, nursing homes, health care organizations and nursing associations must now work together to bring thousands into the nursing profession.

Connecticut's hospitals and nursing homes and home care associations have recently launched a public-private program to address the nursing shortage. Recommendations include:

- Recruiting a new generation of health care workers through a comprehensive public relations effort;
- Encouraging high school students to consider the benefits of a nursing career;

- Encouraging Connecticut's institutions of higher education to expand health care education opportunities through more support for our colleges and universities, and additional financial aid for Connecticut students who plan to join the health care field;

- Researching and developing new, innovative training programs, such as night, weekend and Internet-based programs;

- Enacting regulatory reforms to provide flexibility in the use of staff so that nurses and health care workers can spend their time providing patient care; and,

- Instituting a comprehensive campaign to attract and retain the most talented people to nursing and health care professions.

Any solutions must have the strong support and endorsement of lawmakers, health care providers and the public. Reaching out to the public to explain the seriousness of the nursing shortage is the first step. I urge that all of you join in an outpouring of calls and letters to the governor, legislators, and the media to tell your stories and make this the priority legislative issue this term.

Dennis J. Magid

President

Jewish Home for the Elderly of Fairfield County