

Idaho Statesman, Wednesday, Feb. 11, 2009 – by Colleen LaMay (2 pages)

Idaho's nurse shortage could soon become a surplus

Job market may tighten, but nurses with advanced training will still be needed

If you are among thousands of Idahoans hoping to ride out the economic storm by becoming a registered nurse, you might want to get moving. One of Idaho's hottest jobs will cool by 2012, according to a new report. A 22-member nursing council appointed by Gov. Butch Otter said the supply of RNs statewide would meet the demand at hospitals and other places in three years if nursing programs continued to expand as expected.

The council's report is a turnabout: Health officials for years have said the state is short on nurses. The state has about 11,200 registered nurses, and thousands more are expected to join the work force by 2012. So many people applied to Idaho nursing programs for the 2007-08 school year that 900 had to be turned away for lack of space.

As it looks now, the report is right about some things and wrong about others, its authors say. The wild card that changed things was the speed at which the economy slid into recession, blurring the freshly released snapshot on nursing.

One result of the recession is that right now, Ada County's large nonprofit hospitals say there is no shortage of nurses. Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise even laid off a few nurses, although none was a bedside nurse responsible for direct patient care.

Nurses at Saint Al's and at St. Luke's in Boise and Meridian are hanging onto jobs they already have, postponing retirement or returning to jobs they left to raise families. "All of us are seeing lower nursing turnover rates than we were a year ago," said Karen Hodge, a nursing council member and chief nursing officer at Saint Al's.

Nonetheless, council members agree: Don't check nursing off your career Plan B for weathering an economic collapse. "If you look at the economy as a whole, health care has taken some hits, but not nearly as many as some other sectors," said B.J. Swanson, chairman of the nursing council and chairman of the board of Gritman Medical Center in Moscow.

People will age and get sick, regardless of Wall Street's fever chart. "We are just beginning to see the baby boomers retire," said Noreen Davis, vice president of nursing and patient-care services for St. Luke's Health System. "Even though it looks like we don't have a shortage right now, when the economy turns around, it will come right back," said Pamela Springer, associate dean of the College of Health Sciences and chairwoman of the department of nursing at Boise State University.

It takes two years or four years to become a registered nurse, depending on whether nurses get an associate degree or a bachelor's degree. By the time students graduate in 2012, demand may rise again if the economy is improving.

Another unforeseen effect of Idaho's ailing economy is the state budget cuts that sliced into college and university programs. State nursing programs so far appear unlikely to grow at the rate expected in the report. "What we thought we were going to be able to do five months ago we aren't going to be able to do," Springer said.

Without expanding nursing programs, would-be nurses will continue to hit the bottleneck of programs with too few seats to meet ongoing demand. To members of the council, the biggest news in the study wasn't about basic registered nurses. It was about the state's unmet appetite for nurses with advanced credentials as midwives, nurse anesthetists or nurse practitioners and for nurses with master's or doctoral degrees to teach nursing.

The biggest obstacle to replacing nursing educators is pay, a problem that persists, recession or no recession.

The report says nursing teachers now earn a fraction of the pay they would get on the outside - less than \$49,000 a year on average to teach, compared with \$59,000 for nurses with less education working in hospitals or other settings. The pay problem is nationwide.

"We've got to keep our eye on the long term and not look at the immediate downturn," Springer said. "As soon as we pull out from this, we will be short of providers again."