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Nursing shortage inspires bootstrap approach

Hospitals offer educational opportunities to attract, improve staff

The Wood River Valley is sometimes like an island, where the issues facing the rest of the country lap ashore eventually. Among other crises the United States is facing, it is in the midst of a nursing shortage that's expected to worsen as baby boomers age. It's not just the demand for health care that's relevant—it's the age of the nurses themselves that is rising. At St. Luke's Wood River Medical Center the situation, while not dire, is costly.

St. Luke's Wood River needs six trained intensive-care-unit nurses to cover all shifts. For many years, the hospital hired contract nurses through national nursing agencies. Though highly competent, those nurses cost significantly more than permanent employees.

By 2025, the shortage could reach 500,000, according to a report from the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. The report estimates that to deal with the shortage, some 30,000 additional nurses should be graduated annually.

"From a national standpoint there is definitely a nursing shortage and there will continue to be a shortage," said St. Luke's Wood River CEO Bruce Jensen. "Nursing in general is a workforce primarily made up of females. They have a lot of other opportunities. We work 24/7, evenings, nights and weekends, 12-hours shifts. It's a very rewarding profession but a very challenging profession."

But there are plenty of college students who wish to earn a nursing degree. The problem stems from a lack of faculty. According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, U.S. nursing schools turned away more than 40,000 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2007 due to lack of faculty, clinical sites, classrooms, clinical teachers and budget constraints.

At St. Luke's Wood River, the hospital, like many others facing a crunch, is using advanced education to shore up its nursing staff. By offering this training to nurses already on staff, the hospital can save nearly \$200,000 each year.

"We have three openings now but we don't have a serious challenge," Jensen said. "The average turnover is 8 percent per year here, whereas nationally it's as high as 16 percent."

Cindy Mosier, manager of nursing at St. Luke's Wood River, made an initial presentation to the St. Luke's Wood River Foundation about advanced nursing certifications.

With the foundation's support, St. Luke's Wood River nurses Cynthia Preston and Marvin "Mouse" Miles spent six weeks this year in hands-on, critical-care training at St. Luke's Regional Medical Center in Boise as part of a year-long program to become intensive-care-unit nurses.

"We needed to start growing our own," Miles said. "I think it was a quick reward for them. We showed that we're committed to the community."

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Miles arrived in the Wood River Valley in 1968. She worked at the Sun Valley deli in exchange for a ski pass. Later, she worked at the Ore House.

"It was a lark," she said. "I was in and out of here for years."

When she turned 45, she decided to return to school to become a nurse. Miles spent eight years in administration and the past two years in patient care.

"What the hell was I thinking?" she said, laughing. "I was full time for four years. Then I came back here."

Most nurses start off on medical surgical floors learning a variety of different skills.

"That's where you see everything and hone your skills," Miles said. "In a bigger hospital you could choose. In a rural hospital (like Wood River) you need all those skills. It's not just finish school and that's that. It's an adventure for me and that's why I do it."

Attracting nurses to the profession and to the area is not what makes it hard for rural hospitals in a place like Sun Valley. Just as it is for teachers, the cost of living can be prohibitive.

"We have a 13 percent Wood River differential," Jensen said. "In the Boise system nurses are paid what is normal pay range for an RN with experience. We figure it's a 13 percent difference between Wood River and Boise."

At the Wood River Medical Center, the starting hourly rate for a new nurse is approximately \$23 per hour.

Funding for the advanced critical care training was provided by the Wood River Foundation with help of the P. Scott McLean Jr., M.D. Endowment Fund for Staff Education. The fund was specifically created to ensure access to training and education for hospital staff by the Boswell Family Foundation.

Training for the advanced certification is rigorous. Over a six-week period, Miles and Preston spent three nights a week, at a minimum, at St. Luke's in Boise in the coronary care unit. Along with the 64-hour, online coursework, the training includes hands-on intensive care unit training rotation, practical experience and passing the certification exam.

"I was a deer in the headlights the first two weeks," Miles said. "It was a great experience. We showed Boise. We were like ambassadors for the valley. We're not just some podunk, pretty little hospital. We're pretty sophisticated. Now nurses from there come up here if we have gaps."

One of the allures of the profession is that nurses can keep changing.

"Now I'm a cardio nurse and an ICU nurse," Miles said. "The job just blossoms for you. You have so many pathways."