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by Kimberlee Kruesi (AP)
Page 1 of 1

Report: Idaho's nurses are fleeing to better-paying states

BOISE — Idaho continues to experience pockets of severe nursing shortages while better-paying jobs in surrounding states are attracting Idaho's nursing graduates, according to a recently released report from the Idaho Department of Labor.

The report, issued late last month, found that southwestern Idaho faces the biggest challenge of finding enough nurses because it's nestled in the state's fastest-growing region with the highest aging population. Meanwhile, the competition over health care workers has also tightened in northern Idaho because of its proximity to the Washington border, a state concurrently facing a nursing workforce deficit.

In contrast, south central Idaho is seeing a surplus of nurses who provide basic medical care in hospitals and nursing homes because of the College of Southern Idaho's program that produces licensed practical and vocational nurses. For example, the college produced 47 licensed practical nurses in 2016 when the projected demand was only 13.

In eastern Idaho, Brigham Young University-Idaho produces more than 230 registered nurses each year when the demand is around 70. However, the region is in need of more advanced nurses with more expertise.

"This report is a snapshot of where we are at," said Jessica Beaver-Nelson, senior research analyst with the labor agency. "We're not only seeing significant shortages in parts of our states, but it's also interesting that we're seeing a drop in how many people are teaching nursing students."

The report found that Idaho had 18 unfilled faculty positions as of October and additional 17 faculty members are expected to return to the workforce or retire over the next year.

Beaver-Nelson added that nursing instructors are required to have a master's degree to teach. However, nurses can earn more money with higher degrees, so the temptation to continue working at a higher pay rather than launch a less-lucrative career in education can be too big of a draw for many, she said.

Idaho's median wage for nurse practitioners ranked last among its six other surrounding states and ranked second to last for registered nurses, coming in higher only to Utah. Idaho's nurse anesthetists have the fourth highest median wage compared with neighboring states.

Next year's report on Idaho's nursing supply will have more detailed information on how many Idaho students are leaving for jobs outside the state, Beaver-Nelson said.

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