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Florida still sees high numbers of nurse vacancies in spite of economic recession

Floridians may soon face reduced access to health care services if strategies to address the state's nursing shortage are not put in place. Though the economic recession led to a reduction in statewide nurse vacancy rates, recent reports from the Florida Center for Nursing demonstrate that it was not enough to resolve the state's severe nursing shortage. Furthermore, experts fear that the recession may be causing patients to defer treatment until the economy improves, which could lead to a spike in demand just as a large cohort of nurses is leaving Florida's workforce.

"Due to the number of anecdotal reports we were receiving about new graduates struggling to find employment, we hoped that we would see significant improvement in the severity of Florida's nursing shortage," said Florida Center for Nursing Executive Director, Mary Lou Brunell, RN, MSN. "Unfortunately," she added, "that was not the case."

Two new reports released this month by the Florida Center for Nursing, the state entity responsible for collecting data and reporting on the state's nursing workforce, found that Florida's nursing education programs continued to turn away vast numbers of qualified applicants while employers also forecasted considerable growth in positions. The Center surveyed nurse employers throughout the state to determine current vacancies and expected growth in positions to produce the *Workforce Demand in Nursing-Intensive Settings* report. The Center also surveyed 100% of Florida's pre-licensure nursing education programs to simultaneously release the *2010 Florida Nursing Education Capacity and Nurse Faculty Supply/Demand* report. This year's education report provides information on trends in Florida's nursing education system from 2007-2009.

"While we did see reduced vacancy rates for nurse positions, we believe much of this was caused by existing nurses increasing their hours, returning to the workforce, or delaying retirement because of the economic crunch," said Dr. Jennifer Nooney, Ph.D., the Center's Associate Director of Research. "In short, we believe these are temporary improvements brought on by the recession and not long-lasting additions to Florida's nurse workforce. Not only was the growth not enough to resolve the state's shortage, we expect a great deal of these nurses to either leave

the workforce or reduce their hours once the economy improves—leaving the state once again with high vacancy rates. At the same time, we found that pre-licensure education programs turned away more than 13,000 qualified applicants during 2008-2009 due to lack of funding and clinical space limitations. If we are going to see lasting improvements, we need to focus on retaining our existing nurse workforce and strategically expanding education capacity.”

Nursing continues to be one of the largest and fastest-growing professions in the state. There are a number of entry-level positions that require little specialized education while also offering exposure to the nursing field, starting at nine weeks to become a Patient Care Tech. According to the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation, 3 of the top 15 occupations expecting the most job growth are nursing-related and will generate an expected 66,539 new jobs for these three areas alone by 2017; Registered Nurses rank 5 on the list. “In a time when Florida is facing historic unemployment rates, there are a number of career choices that can put people to work immediately while bringing them into the nursing field. Nursing as a profession offers a number of advancement and educational opportunities, from Licensed Practical Nurses to nursing faculty prepared at the doctoral level” said Brunell.

The Center’s findings continue to show that the nursing shortage in Florida persists because more than 40% of Florida’s nurses are approaching retirement age within the next 10 years and there are not enough younger nurses to replace them. Resolving Florida’s nursing shortage will require a multi-pronged approach, including interventions to increase the production of new nurses, improve the work environment to retain existing nurses, and redesign work to accommodate the older nurse. To this end, the Florida Center for Nursing recently announced that it had selected seven recipients from across the state for the 2010 Retention & Recruitment small grants program, a Center initiative that aims to encourage innovative, evidence-based retention solutions from the nursing community. The full list of recipients will be available on the Center’s website at: <http://www.flcenterfornursing.org/retention/fundedprojects.cfm>.

For more information on the Florida Center for Nursing, and to view a full copy of the reports, please visit www.FLCenterforNursing.org.

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The Florida Center for Nursing is the definitive source for information, research, and strategies addressing the dynamic nurse workforce needs in Florida.