

HOSPITALS NEED HELP

Shortage of health workers could raise costs

BY BRIAN BANDELL
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Casey Berger, a first-year nursing student, receives instruction from Stephanie Cawley, a nursing skills professor, at Palm Beach State College.

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More South Florida hospitals are struggling to find workers for key positions, and the cost of providing health care could rise sharply as a result.

The labor shortage has hit many industries during the Covid-19 pandemic, but few have felt it as acutely as hospitals. They already faced a nursing shortage, and the long, grueling hours of caring for patients during the health crisis only made it worse. Meanwhile, other staff positions have also become challenging to fill.

To help retain and recruit workers, hospitals raised wages. But that will ultimately impact businesses through higher health insurance premiums. Companies could also struggle with employees who are out sick for longer periods because they can't schedule doctor appointments quickly due to the shortage of hospital workers.

Attorney Doug Wolfe, a partner at Miami-based Wolfe Pincavage who represents many hospital and health care systems, said the staffing shortages have driven up labor costs and reduced revenues because some providers had to cancel elective procedures for lack of medical staff. These costs will eventually be passed on to the insurance plans through contract negotiations and patients who pay out of pocket, he said.



WOLFE PINCAVAGE

Wolfe also has some clients who can have longer wait times – sometimes six months for behavioral health care – because of a staff shortage.

“In 18 months, our vacancies have tripled,” said Margie Vargas, senior VP and chief human resources officer at Hollywood-based Memorial Healthcare System. “We are now at over 2,100 vacancies.”

A new report on the nursing shortage in Florida by HIS Markit, on behalf of the Florida Hospital Association and the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida, shows how dire the situation has become since the pandemic started.

It said the supply of registered nurses (RNs) was 11,500 short of patient demand in 2019, and the supply of licensed nurse practitioners was 5,600 short. It forecast those shortages would increase to 37,400 and 21,700, respectively, by 2035 based on workforce trends and the state's population growth.

The study notes that many nurses faced burnout or feared for their own safety during the surge of Covid-19, leading to some early retirements. The same stress factors have impacted doctors, as the state deals with a physician shortage, especially in primary care and certain high-demand specialties. If Florida's colleges can't gear up to train enough medical professionals for this rapidly growing state, many more patients could go without care in the future.

Patient care is already an issue at some hospitals that lost their most experienced nurses to retirement or competitors, leaving them with less experienced nurses, said Marcella Rutherford, dean of the Ron and Kathy Assaf College of Nursing at Nova Southeastern University. Some nurses have been performing other jobs, such as secretary work, lab draws and transporting patients, because hospitals are short in those positions and that's added more stress, she said.

"There's such an extreme nursing shortage in hospitals that nurses can pick and choose where to work and are getting large sign-on bonuses," Rutherford said.

Emily Trzeciak, a first-year nursing student at Palm Beach State College, practices on a mannequin.

Enlarge

Emily Trzeciak, a first-year nursing student at Palm Beach State College, practices on a mannequin.

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Impact on hospitals

Before the pandemic, vacancies at MHS were mostly in clinical positions such as nurses and therapists. But now there's a shortage of workers in a whole range of positions, including environmental services, patient transporters, food services and clerical jobs, Vargas said.

When the hospitality industry raised wages to lure workers back, that created competition for MHS service workers in similar pay scales who left health care for retail

jobs, she said. In response, MHS raised its minimum wage to \$15, which boosted applications.

MHS has twice the number of nursing vacancies it had before the pandemic, Vargas said.

“We are experiencing challenges that we never experienced before,” she said.

The biggest blow came from nurses who opted to retire early to take more lucrative offers as travel nurses working at hospitals around the county. That, in turn, forced MHS to rely more on temporary staff, including about 450 traveling nurses and respiratory therapists, Vargas said.

“It’s unfortunate, but travel companies had the opportunity to increase rates dramatically,” she said.

Vargas said MHS is in discussions with colleges to support the growth of their health care programs. She’d also like to see the U.S. make it easier to recruit international nurses, including allowing foreign nurses to practice here without a bachelor’s degree.

Jackson Health System in Miami has over 300 openings among its 4,000 nursing positions, Executive VP and Chief Human Resources Officer Julie Staub said. It also has shortages of respiratory therapists, nursing assistants and medical technicians. Dealing with travel nursing companies that recruit away staff has been a major challenge, she said.

“Every time there was a [Covid] spike somewhere in the country, there were offers for our nurses to travel, and it depleted the supply of nurses in South Florida,” Staub said. “In July and August, there was a surge in South Florida, and local systems had to bring nurses from all over the country through agencies. It puts pressure on the existing workforce because you want to retain people, but you can’t pay everyone those ridiculous rates. It’s almost like price gouging during a hurricane.”

Staub said JHS is partnering with local colleges to help them train more health care workers. That includes training JHS nurses to become faculty at the colleges to help boost enrollment.

BY THE NUMBERS

21%

Projected population growth in Florida from 2019 to 2035

51%

Projected growth in senior population in Florida from 2016 to 2035

31%

Expected growth in demand for RNs in Florida from 2019 to 2035

40%

Expected growth in demand for LPNs in Florida from 2019 to 2035

22%

Anticipated growth in Florida RNs from 2019 to 2035

9%

Anticipated growth in Florida LPNs from 2019 to 2035

SOURCE: IHS Markit study for Florida Hospital Association and Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida

Staffing companies fill the void

South Florida is a major hub for nurse staffing companies, which have played an essential role in staffing hospitals during the pandemic. The question is whether they can keep up with demand.

[John Martins](#), group president for delivery at Boca Raton-based Cross Country Healthcare (Nasdaq: CCRN), said the pandemic presented a unique challenge, with demand for critical care and nursing talent increasing nationwide.

“Our clients continue to face unprecedented staff shortages, staff burnout from both the emotional and physical impacts of Covid, excessive patient assignments, cost-cutting measures, as well as new rules that seem to be changing daily,” Martins said. “As evidenced by our reported gross margins, we passed along the vast majority of bill rate increases to our health care professionals to ensure we could deliver the critical life-saving assistance our clients desperately needed. While margins have decreased, we are incredibly proud that we have been able to respond with a growing number of professionals at the bedside for our clients.”

To meet demand for nurses, it would help if there was national licensure for nursing and standardized credentials so it’s easier for nurses to cross state lines, Martins said. Hospitals should also consider mental health programs to provide a more supportive environment for nurses so they can stay on the job, he added.

The pandemic has also exacerbated the shortage of physicians, said [Keith Shattuck](#), CEO of Deerfield Beach-based All Star Healthcare Solutions, a health care staffing firm. His company has attracted more doctors looking for the flexible schedules and ability to travel that come with temporary work – not to boost their salaries, he said.

“We’ve never had more jobs than we have now on a temporary or permanent basis,” Shattuck said.



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Colleges aim to ramp up

South Florida colleges report much interest from students in nursing and other health care fields, but they often can’t accept all qualified applicants because they don’t have room in their programs.

Palm Beach State College usually takes 80% of the health care students who meet the standards for acceptance, said Edward Willey, dean of health sciences. Hospitals are in dire need of workers, with some positions 30% vacant, but PBSC only has room to train a limited number of students, he added.

The bottleneck is in the fixed number of clinical rotations at local health care facilities where students receive hands-on experience, he said.

“I can bring in hundreds of students and lecture to them, but for every lecture there must be a lab, and for every lab there’s a clinical rotation,” Willey said.

He is seeking to expand partnerships with local hospitals to create clinical rotations in other settings, such as physician offices, surgery centers and long-term care facilities. PBSC is also allowing some hospitals to hire students – who are working to complete their clinical training – before they graduate.

Another impediment to PBSC adding more health care students is its number of faculty. Willey said recruiting is a challenge because health care workers with advanced degrees can make a lot of money working in the industry. Health care students pay the same tuition as other students, but the cost of administering health care programs is much higher.

“The pandemic educated people on the importance of these health care professions,” Willey said. “If ever there was a time [for more funding], this is it.”

Miami Dade College President Madeline Pumariega said she’s committed to increasing the number of students in its nursing programs by expanding partnerships with Baptist Health South Florida, Jackson Health System and Leon Medical Centers. To mitigate the challenge of limited training spaces in hospitals, MDC purchased advanced simulation equipment so nursing students can receive the training previously done at hospitals at the college, she said.



COURTESY OF MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

Pumariega said MDC would like to expand its nursing, respiratory therapy and surgical technician programs, but it needs to hire more faculty in those areas, which would require more state funding.

As for the physician shortage, medical schools are hampered by the limited number of clinical rotations and residency slots in the state, said Dr. [Johannes Vieweg](#), dean and chief academic officer of the Dr. Kiran C. Patel College of Allopathic Medicine at Nova Southeastern University. Out of 8,000 annual applications, it can only admit 50 students.

The federal government, not the state, is responsible for funding a large part of residency positions. Additional funding comes from grants, donations and health systems.

“We just have to make sure that if we increase class size we have the resources to do that,” Vieweg said. “It’s a terrible thing for students to invest so much in becoming a doctor and not find a residency.”

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