

Approaching nursing shortage could reach critical proportions

As nurses retire, so do millions of baby boomers who'll soon need medical care

By [Sanne Specht](#)

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Rogue Valley health care professionals met Tuesday to brainstorm solutions to a critical nursing shortage created in part by the dynamics of the baby boomer generation.

Kathy Bryon, of the Gordon Elwood Foundation, said a dwindling population of aging caregivers is struggling to meet the steadily increasing needs of an aging population.

"It's like the perfect storm is brewing," said Bryon. "The nursing workforce, which will touch almost all of us throughout our lives, will experience an unprecedented shortage if we do not act now and together as a community."

The Elwood Foundation, in conjunction with the Jefferson Regional Health Alliance and the Rogue Valley Workforce Development Council, held its second think-tank symposium in Medford on Tuesday. The event drew 75 nurses.

As baby boomers age, the need for nurses will continue to rise. That need may be even greater here: By 2012, Oregon's population is expected be the fourth oldest in the union, said Jim Fong, executive director of The Job Council.

As the first of 78 million baby boomers begin to retire and enroll in Medicare, the increased need for care will collide with an anticipated loss of nurses who are themselves retiring from nursing, said Dr. Jon Lange, meeting facilitator and professor of communications at Southern Oregon University.

The average age of registered nurses is 47 and the average age at graduation is currently 31. Between the years 2007 and 2020, there will be an estimated 15,000 nursing job openings in Oregon, Lange said.

Monday's problem-solving symposium was unique in that the problems of nursing recruitment, retention and education were approached from the nurses' perspective, Bryon said.

While the shortage will impact everyone needing skilled nursing care, hardest hit will be those least able to pay for care, she said.

The current ratio of nurses to under-insured and noninsured patients needing care in Jackson and Josephine county is currently 1-to-1,025 — as opposed to a 1-to-118 statewide ratio, Bryon said.

Part of the problem lies in the limitations in the pipeline that moves nurses from school to the job. Jobs in nursing education don't pay as well as being a nurse. And ongoing downsizing in hospital staffing and other care facilities makes it difficult for student nurses to get required on-site training, said Viki Brown, manager of Jackson County Public Health.

"The biggest ship to turn around will be the salaries of nurse educators and increasing slots in schools," said Brown.

Burnout is another factor affecting the nursing shortage. As work loads increase, many are finding hospital nursing to be an overwhelming task. Also, some nurses who left to raise families want to return to work, but find ongoing education requirements to be cost- and time-prohibitive, said Bryon.

"Maybe we can get retired nurses to mentor new nurses," she said. "Or maybe they can work outside the hospital in long-term care facilities, or schools or community centers, but at the same rate of pay. Even a crisis line for nurses would be helpful."

Traci Fossen is a registered nurse and the director of Kids Health Connection, a community collaboration between Providence Medford Medical Center, Asante Health System, La Clinica and the Medford, Phoenix and Talent school districts.

Fossen said legislative intervention will likely be necessary. But, in the meantime, the two meetings had created some hope regarding local empowerment, she said.

"The question is how do we begin a grass roots movement to really address these issues without waiting for Washington, D.C. to try and fix it?" she said.

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