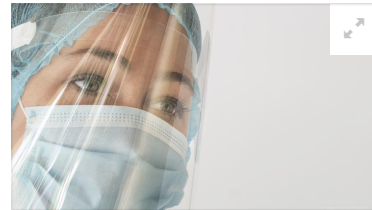


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HEALTH CARE

South Florida hospitals, colleges tackle health care worker shortage



TETRA IMAGES

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After a tumultuous two years of the Covid-19 pandemic that included multiple variants and case surges, the health

care industry now faces the long-term fallout of a highly exacerbated labor shortage.

Heightened physical and emotional demands, plus the threat of constant exposure to the virus itself, have caused a ripple effect of issues throughout the health care sector. Severe burnout and stress, in particular, have been the tipping points for many professionals who've chosen to retire early, transition out of hospital settings or switch careers completely.

A March report from Elsevier Health, a provider of information solutions for research and health customers, drew responses from nearly 3,000 physicians and nurses in 111 countries to reveal the challenges driving burnout within the industry. The study showed that key themes across clinician responses included understaffed teams, administration inefficiencies, lack of appropriate training and high expectations from patients.

It's a crisis that's inspiring action. In January, the Biden-Harris administration awarded \$103 million in American Rescue Plan funds to improve the retention of health care workers and help respond to the nation's critical staffing needs by reducing burnout and promoting mental health and wellness among the health care workforce.

Here in South Florida, the pressure is high to recruit and retain health care workers, as the region is still recovering from some of the harshest Covid-19 outbreaks in the country.



Margie Vargas, senior VP and chief human resources officer at Memorial Healthcare System
MEMORIAL HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

“Our data shows that Covid-19 had a dramatic impact on accelerating retirements and health care workers’ decisions to leave the industry,” said Margie Vargas, senior VP and chief human resources officer with Memorial Healthcare System. “Our turnover rate has doubled and our vacancy rate is three times what it was before Covid. Within 60 days of the start of the pandemic, our loss of staff was very dramatic, and it’s been quite challenging to recover from that.”

A multifaceted approach to retention

Memorial’s status as one of the largest health care organizations in the tri-county area has not shielded it from the devastating effects that burnout, increased need for work-life flexibility, and competition from temporary staffing agencies and non-health care industries have had on the labor shortage.

In response, the public health care provider has taken a number of steps to increase retention rates, including accelerating its multiyear plan to increase minimum wage to \$15 an hour, offering scholarships to entry-level employees seeking career advancement, and partnering

with mental health services such as BetterHelp to provide employees with wellness resources.

Memorial also launched aggressive recruitment campaigns and created several programs to sway candidates from other industries to consider careers in health care, Vargas said.

“We hire for attitude and we will train for the skills,” she said. “We’ve seen an increase in applicants from the hospitality industry, which was hit pretty dramatically at the beginning of the pandemic. Our health care system is incredibly stable, and we did not lay off one employee during the pandemic. That’s helped us to attract folks who have been in transition since they were laid off in 2020 and 2021.”

A pipeline of nursing school graduates

As the health care industry’s largest occupation, nursing has been particularly vulnerable to staffing shortages and the increasingly wage-competitive market.

A 2021 report commissioned by the Florida Hospital Association and the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida projected the Sunshine State will face a shortfall of 59,100 nurses by 2035. This includes a 12% deficit in registered nurses and a 30% deficit in licensed practical nurses.

Health care leaders are relying heavily on the pipeline of graduates from nursing school programs to fill vacancies.

Dr. Bryan Stewart, president of Miami Dade College's Medical Campus, says he's seen an uptick over the last six months in hospitals aggressively recruiting MDC's nursing students and offering up their facilities as clinical sites - something public colleges traditionally face difficulty in securing.



Dr. Bryan Stewart, president of Miami Dade College's medical campus

MIAMI DADE COLLEGE

“Lately, the hospitals want to capture our students in the first year of their degrees, rather than at the end, and they’re even going to hire our nurses to work as they’re progressing through their degrees,” Stewart said. “The hope is that the students will be able to try out the hospitals, and they’ll already be in the system once they start employment.”

Stewart said MDC’s nursing program has increased its marketing strategies and tapped into internal resources, such as the college’s School for Advanced Studies, to enroll high school students in nursing courses while they obtain two-year associate degrees.

“Our goal is to grow our nursing program by 30% to 40%. We know that there’s a critical shortage and we’re looking at ways to hire more faculty and add more students,” he said. “There’s a lot of competition in South Florida for schools that have RN [registered nurse] and B.S.N. [Bachelor of Science in nursing] programs, but we have systemic changes that we think will continue to keep a good supply of students coming.”