NURSING: THE MOST CRITICAL NEED

According to the University System of Georgia Task Force on Health Profession Education, all health professions in Georgia face significant shortages over the next decade. Limited resources and instructional capacity require that the priority for the next five years be focused on those professions most in jeopardy. The task force has identified nursing as the most fragile and most in need of attention over the near term. The Health Resources and Services Administration said the shortage is due to:

- A growing and aging U.S. population
- High demand for the highest quality of care
- RN workforce at or approaching retirement age
- Difficulties attracting new nurses and retaining the existing workforce

According to the Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH), employment of registered nurses (RN’s) is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through 2016. The Georgia Department of Labor reports that an additional 20,000 RNs will be needed in Georgia by 2012. At the same time, the task force reported that the combined University System of Georgia (USG) and Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) rate of production of RN graduates would yield only 12,000 new nurses by 2012.

Information provided by Gwinnett Medical Center (GMC), Gwinnett County’s largest healthcare provider and third largest employer, indicates more than 100 positions currently open for RNs at GMC. The Gwinnett Medical Center – Duluth, which opened in 2006, created an additional 40 RN positions. The 2009 opening of the new patient tower at Gwinnett Medical Center – Lawrenceville, added between 100-150 RN positions. GMC’s projections estimate the need for nearly 400 additional RNs over the next three years.

The rapid growth of the ethnic minority communities in Gwinnett County has created a critical need for additional bilingual health workers. In the American Hospital Association’s briefing report on Population Diversity and Its Implications for Health Care, Emily Friedman states that, “Cultural competence is a key factor in the quality of health care delivery; it involves not only understanding of population changes, but also sensitivity to and respect for diversity in language, religion, customs, values and traditions.”

A recent report by the Thomas Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) states that; "A major current and projected shortage in nursing professionals in the U.S. is a growing concern threatening the integrity of the healthcare system. Further exacerbating the shortage is the lack of diversity and the increasing average age of nurses.” The report further states; “It is well documented by several studies, that by 2020, a shortage of registered nurses (RNs) in this country is estimated to range from 340,000 to over one million….In addition to the overall shortage, there is a lack of ethnic diversity in the nursing profession as well as among medical professionals…encouraging more diversity in the nursing profession not only will help stem the shortage but also help improve patient care for a growing minority population.”

Associate degree RN programs are the entry point to the health professions for more minority students.

In 2004, associate degree RN programs provided America with 12,907 new minority RNs compared to 9,377 provided by bachelor's degree RN programs.

Nursing Education in Gwinnett County

Although Gwinnett County is one of the largest counties in Georgia, until a few years ago, there were no nursing programs in the county that produced graduates eligible for licensure as registered nurses. In the fall of 2001, Georgia Perimeter College began offering its associate degree nursing program in Gwinnett County with a capacity to serve 35 students, as a satellite of the main campus in Clarkston, Georgia.

In 2002, Gwinnett Technical College partnered with Athens Technical College to bring their associate degree program in nursing to Gwinnett County as a temporary solution to the county's nursing shortage. Athens Technical College started its last class at the Gwinnett Tech campus in the fall of 2007. This satellite program has been offered at Gwinnett Tech on a very
small scale. Since its inception, the Athens Tech satellite has produced 27 graduates eligible for licensure as registered nurses.

With the opening of Georgia Gwinnett College, the new four-year Board of Regents institution in Lawrenceville, Georgia, Perimeter closed its Lawrenceville campus with the exception of the nursing program. According to Verna Rauschenberg, acting dean of nursing for Georgia Perimeter College, an agreement is in place that will allow Georgia Perimeter College to continue to offer the ADN satellite program on the Georgia Gwinnett College campus until a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) program is in place there.

In August 2007, Gwinnett Technical College submitted a feasibility study to the Georgia Board of Nursing in support of its request for developmental approval to offer the associate degree in nursing. On April 1, 2009, GTC received initial approval for the enrollment of the first cohort of students into its associate degree nursing program and welcomed these students in the fall of 2009.

The Impact of Community Colleges on Nursing Professions

While the need for and shortage of well-trained nurses is widely known, the positive and growing impact of community colleges upon the profession is often not acknowledged. Consider that:

- Two-year community colleges educate the majority of healthcare professionals and nurses more efficiently and cost effectively than do four-year colleges and universities (AACC).
- The average annual cost for full-time tuition and fees at a community college is $2,272 versus $5,836 for public four-year colleges (AACC).
- In FY ‘06, community colleges received only 6 percent of almost $106 million in federal grant money awarded to nursing programs (AACC).
- The cost to operate a healthcare program at Gwinnett Technical College is just over $300 per credit hour.
- Every student enrolled in a health and life science program at GTC is doing so at a cost to the college nearly triple the amount it costs to educate that same student as an accounting or marketing major.
- GTC currently has ten health science programs with impeccable pass rates on national certification exams.
- Job placement rates average 98 percent within six months of graduation for RNs graduating with an associate degree in nursing (AACC).
- Registered nurses are projected to generate over 580,000 new jobs by the year 2018, which is among the largest number of new jobs for any occupation (OOH).
- RNs with associate degrees are more likely to remain and work in the communities in which they were educated (AACC).

With development of the new Life Sciences Center, Gwinnett Tech will have the capacity to yield up to one hundred new associate degree in nursing (ADN) graduates per year with the first class of forty scheduled to graduate in the spring of 2011. This new program will allow GTC to contribute significantly to the relief of the nursing shortage in Gwinnett County and Georgia.

The ADN (registered nursing) program is designed to prepare students to provide competent professional nursing care. Students receive both didactic and clinical components to meet the requirements for successful completion of the program. The program of study is seven quarters in length, plus two quarters of pre-requisites. At successful completion of the program, the nursing student is awarded an associate degree in nursing. Graduates are then eligible to apply and take the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN). Upon successful completion of the NCLEX-RN and licensure by the Georgia Board of Nursing, graduates are employed as registered nurses in a variety of settings, including, but not limited to acute care in hospitals, long term care facilities, ambulatory clinics (inpatient/outpatient), physicians’ offices, home healthcare, private or governmental industries, schools and hospice facilities.

It is a little known fact that 59 percent of new nurses and the majority of other new allied healthcare workers are educated at the nation’s two-year colleges. Gwinnett Tech has a unique opportunity to alleviate barriers to entering the RN program for ethnic minority candidates by providing financial assistance, refresher study coursework and by providing child care options for the children of students enrolled in the ADN program. These options include:

- Nursing Scholarships
- Stipends for children of students to attend the Hudgens Early Education Center
• Access to refresher courses, both classroom and online
• Special recruiting efforts to attract ethnic minorities to the nursing program

Implementation of the ADN program will require additional staff, administration and facility resources not covered by current funding sources. Gwinnett Tech has undertaken the Legacy of Lives campaign to raise significant funds to meet these needs through:
• Endowed Chair of Nursing\(^1\)
• Endowed Nursing Professorships\(^2\)
• AD Nursing Lab Naming Opportunities
• General Classrooms Naming Opportunities
• Equipment Donations and Sponsorships

\(^1\) University System of Georgia Task Force on Health Professions Education, Final Report, June 2006, pg 4
\(^2\) Georgia Department of Labor 2006 Georgia Labor Market Explorer
\(^3\) Ibid, Task Force
\(^4\) Friedman, Emily, White Coats and Many Colors – Population Diversity and Its Implications for Health Care, An Issue Briefing, American Hospital Association, 2005
\(^5\) Latina & Latino Nurses: Why are there so few? The Thomas Rivera Policy Institute, University of Southern California, April 2008 p. 6
\(^6\) American Association of Community Colleges, Community College Facts At A Glace, www.aac.nche.edu