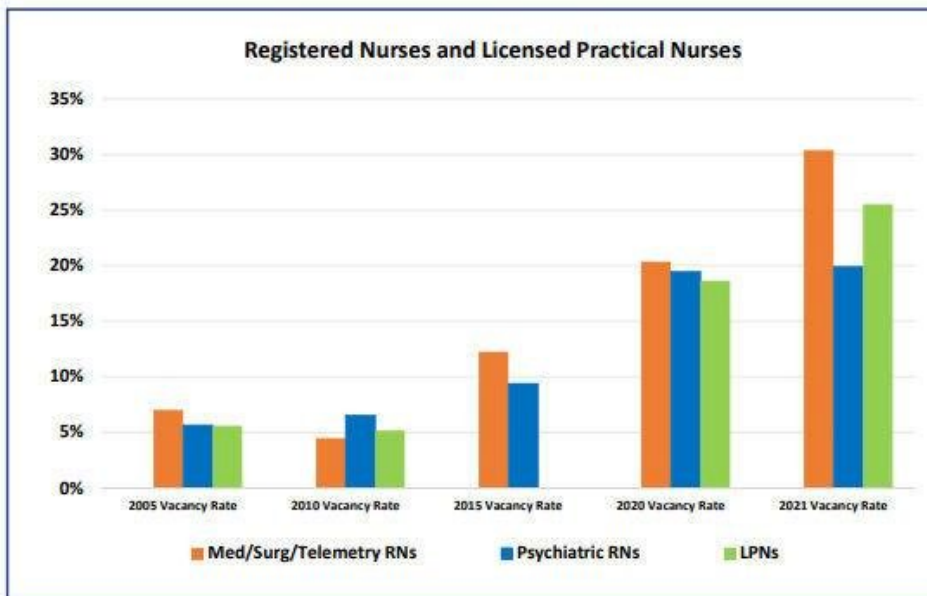


https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/local-hospitals-wku-get-creative-to-fix-critical-nursing-shortage/article_23d3c03b-0b0e-552d-a3ba-084f445922cf.html

Local hospitals, WKU get creative to fix critical nursing shortage

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A Kentucky Hospital Association chart included in the 2022 Workforce Survey shows the increase in vacancy rates among RNs and LPNs over time, even before the pandemic's onset. Disclaimer: The 2021 data reflects 91.7% participation by Kentucky hospitals, but 2020 only reflects 45% survey participation due to the pandemic.

Courtesy of The Kentucky Hospital Association 2022 Workforce Survey

There is no such thing as a crazy idea anymore.

That is, at least when it comes to methods to fix the critical nursing shortage facing Kentucky and the broader U.S., said Tony Bohn, vice president and chief human resources officer at Med Center Health.

The shortage has reached critical levels, according to a recent report published by the Kentucky Hospital Association. In 2021, the report states there were 13,423 vacancies in Kentucky hospitals, which is 17.1% of all non-physician members of the hospital labor force.

The highest incidence of vacancies, the number of open positions left unfilled, occurred among licensed practical nurses – 25.5% —and registered nurses – 21.9%.

In the Barren River area, the registered nurse vacancy rate is several percentage points higher than the state, at 24.5%.

“It’s forced us to get really creative, to think outside the box about how we develop and how we go about attracting talent in the organization. Ideas that may have been looked at as kind of crazy a couple of years ago are now innovative and new,” Bohn said. “A lot of this is like throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks.”

The problem began well before the pandemic, as a large share of nurses edged toward retirement age, although COVID-19 certainly fast-tracked the issue, Bohn said.

The exodus of nurses includes two large groups – nurses who’ve reached retirement age and employees under 35, according to Dr. Mary Bennett, director of Western Kentucky University’s School of Nursing and Allied Health.

“They’re not really retiring,” Bennett said. “What they’re doing is switching jobs. They’re looking for something that pays more or is more family-friendly or maybe will let them work remote.”

In 2021, Millennials (those aged 21 to 40) made up nearly 60% of registered nurses in Kentucky. These younger nurses will have even more on their plate in the near future, as the KHA survey found that 36% of psychiatric nurses and 27% of OR/PACU nurses plan to retire by 2030.

The cost is huge, Bennett said. Without more experienced nurses to act as mentors for nursing students on their clinical rounds, recently graduated nurses have to take over.

“They’re not ready to take on a student because they’re just trying to figure out which end is up,” Bennett said. “They’re busy and they’re tired, too.”



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It's gotten to the point where some units are limiting the number of nursing students they can take on, which consequently limits the number of nursing students WKU can admit into the program, she added.

Bohn said that Med Center Health has not dropped any medical services or limited access to care in any way, but to avoid that outcome in the future, they will have to make long- and short-term adjustments.

“We’re approaching this very strategically, we’re looking at this as a long-term venture for us,” Bohn said. “We’re not going to fix this overnight. We’re out building infrastructure to grow health care workers as quickly as we can.”

Med Center Health is collaborating with WKU, SKYCTC and local high schools to build this seamless pipeline to prepare students at all levels for a nursing career.

Bennett is also working to make the pipeline less “leaky” at WKU, she said, by encouraging students to persevere through tough science classes and initial failures.

“We have a lot of people who want to be a nurse and they take that first science class or so and they find out that science is hard,” she said. “They don’t make a good grade in the class and they have to repeat it and they get discouraged and they quit nursing and they go do something else.”

WKU doesn’t want that outcome, and neither do Kentucky hospitals. Building communities of peer support through Living Learning Communities on campus, offering tutoring for traditionally difficult science classes and not turning away any qualified program candidates are several of the ways WKU is working to widen and strengthen the pipeline, Bennett said.

WKU is also focusing on marketing its in-state tuition scholarships for out-of-state students to bring more future nurses to the state, she added.

Local hospitals can’t solely rely on long-term solutions to alleviate the current problem, though, said Kimberly Hoffman, talent and workforce development manager at Med Center Health Bowling Green.

“You have to take multiple approaches,” Hoffman said. “On a short-term basis, we’ve increased the number of travel nurses that we’ve had but we’ve also created our own internal agency, which has actually helped us reduce

some of our external travelers. So that helps us buffer our current vacancies while we work on these long-term, building-our-pipeline solutions.”

Med Center Health is one of many Kentucky hospitals also offering incentives like raises and sign-on bonuses to attract new employees and keep turnover at bay. But this is an expensive solution, so they have to be strategic about it.

“We’re making sure that it’s helping us either ensure throughput of people or patients in the facility,” Bohn said. “We’re making sure we have the right people in the right place at the right time to provide care.”

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