

Innovative Training of Nurses Will Improve Health Care

Every Virginian lives within a day's drive of some of the most advanced medical research centers, hospitals, doctors, nurses and technology in the world.

Yet, for many Virginians — particularly poor, elderly and job-bound residents — that fact has only passing relevance. The bulk of their medical care is delivered by local doctors and nurses, and studies have found that far too many counties have medical care shortages.

The shortage of highly trained nurses is especially troubling.

They are often the first professionals a patient sees in a hospital, the ones who interact with a patient most often day and night, and the last ones a patient sees before going home.

They provide a compassionate touch, even as they act with dispassionate technical prowess. It is no surprise, then, that they are highly sought after and sometimes drawn away from the communities that need them most.

We need to give this critical, growing cadre of professionals more and better opportunities to thrive in both their chosen careers and their chosen communities. But helping them is not as easy as writing a check. It requires knowledge of Virginia's demographics, economics, health care sector, information technology and educational infrastructure, as well as a good measure of common sense.

Last week, Gov. Bob McDonnell presided over the signing of an agreement between Virginia's Community Colleges and George Washington University to address the shortage of educational opportunities for nurses across Virginia in a focused, concrete way.

The agreement brings together the advanced classroom, online and mentoring resources of GW — including those at the School of Nursing in Ashburn — and the vital foundational role of the community college system.

Under this agreement, proven nurses — those who hail from accredited community colleges and have solid academic and performance records — will now be guaranteed admission to the GW

School of Nursing. Specifically, those with an associate degree will have a solid stepladder to a bachelor's degree and a master's degree.

In the near term, the result will be easier, more efficient access to career advancement for nurses. Over time, it will make for stronger clinics and hospitals. It will make local health care safer and more effective by ensuring best practices and new technology are regularly incorporated.

Of equal importance, it will contribute to the governor's comprehensive plan for fostering the attainment of 100,000 additional bachelor's degrees over 15 years and bolstering long-term economic vitality across the state.

Several aspects of this agreement are notable. Foremost, it responds to the realities of daily life for nurses. Many face long shifts, have families to raise, attend to aging parents, and also try to squeeze in civic and school responsibilities. At the same time, they need face-to-face interaction to ensure they get the full benefit of their investment in advanced education. This agreement will facilitate tailored approaches to meet those needs.

Collaboration between public and private education administrators to provide new opportunities for nurses is a small and necessary step, but not a sufficient one. Nurses and nursing students across the state will need to know these opportunities exist. So raising awareness will be another element of our approach.

The agreement is open to nursing graduates who meet the eligibility criteria regardless of which accredited community college they have attended. Neither the state nor GW will pick winners and losers among community colleges by size, geographic location or any other criteria.

The agreement is well-grounded and potentially scalable. Dabney S. Lancaster Community College and the GW School of Nursing already have a pilot initiative of this type, and that experience will inform our approach. Were other private colleges and universities to use this template for similar initiatives, the results could be transformative.

Finally, it implicitly recognizes that some jobs in our communities have benefits that extend far beyond their paychecks. The decisions that a highly trained nurse makes each day have multiple long-term benefits: medical, economic, social and of course familial.

Unfortunately, even as the nursing shortage across America has grown in recent years, tens of thousands of qualified applicants have been turned away from baccalaureate and graduate degree nursing programs because of limitations in educational capacity. By working across sectors, institutions and programs, Virginians can begin to address that challenge.