Survey: Greatest Need Is in Health Workers

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Whether it’s registered nurses, doctors, physical therapists, or behavioral health specialists, much of Southeast Alaska is having trouble filling many vacancies in the health care field, according to a recent study cited at the Southeast Conference meeting in Sitka this week.

And research by the consulting firm Rain Coast Data indicates that the need for these positions will only increase, raising questions of how best to recruit and retain these professionals, and whether the state can offer programs that will train Alaskans, who will tend to stay in the state, for these positions.

Rain Coast Data conducted the Southeast Alaska Health Care Workforce Analysis for the Southeast Conference with support from the Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association, Bartlett Regional Hospital, SEARHC, the University of Alaska Anchorage College of Health, and the University of Alaska Southeast.

“The whole survey grew out of concerns we’d heard from people in the community about the need for more health care providers,” said Karen Carey, University of Alaska Southeast provost, a position that oversees all academic programs in Southeast.

“We’ve been hearing these things, but we felt like we needed to get more information.”

Carey said she wanted more information about whether the offerings at UAS are aligning with job opportunities.

“We want students to come and we want students to take programs,” she said. “But we also want to make sure we’re offering programs particularly in health care where they’re going to be able to get jobs, because that’s why most students go to school today. What this survey has really provided us with is the information we need to know how to move forward, and know what programs we should be looking at offering in the future.”

Carey pointed to one of the figures in the survey indicating that 30 percent of the providers in Southeast hospitals and clinics are “travelers.”

“They come up here to make some money, because we don’t have enough people to provide the services that are needed,” she said. “My goal is to make sure we’re training Alaskans who want to stay in Alaska to be service providers, rather than bringing people up from the Lower 48. ... I think having people from Alaska who understand what Alaska is like – and being able to relate to people who need health care – is really important.”

Health care is one of the top employers in the region, with 3,990 workers in the field earning some $243 million – 11 percent of all wages in Southeast – in 2018.

SEARHC is the largest health care employer, with a 1,200-person workforce throughout Southeast.

“Regional health care wages have increased considerably in recent years, growing by $47 million over the past three years, from $195 million in 2015.

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to $243 million in 2018,” the study says. “The health care sector is one of the top wage providers in the region.”

The study also notes that the total number of people working in the health care field is larger than the number of jobs.

“High worker replacement rates, partly due to the extensive use of traveling health care workers, means that total workers significantly exceed total jobs,” the summary stated. “More than 5,000 participated in the Southeast Alaska health care industry in 2018.”

The study lists positions and wages, economic impacts of the health care industry, and in which jobs there is projected to be the greatest need, and the highest turnover.

Physicians and surgeons are at the top of the pay scale and are the hardest to recruit, ranking at the top, along with psychiatric technicians. Also at the top of the “difficult positions to fill” category are physician assistants, surgical technologists, radiologic technologists, massage therapists, registered nurses, physical therapists, and speech and language pathologists. About half of those positions on the list were identified as “difficult to fill” by at least 50 percent of the health care administrators who were surveyed.

The survey found the top recruitment strategies to be “more compensation,” followed by “flexible work arrangements,” “pay for moving expenses,” “train new employees,” “train existing employees,” while the least effective tools were job fairs, and seeking talent from nontraditional sources. Using a recruiting agency was ranked as least effective.

On the issue of turnover and retention, the top factor in retention was “overall quality of life,” and “originally from Alaska.” Other top “keys to retention,” in order of importance were recreation, arts and culture, community interactions, quality of K-12 education and activities for kids.

Reasons for quitting? The top factor was cost of living, followed by the lack of childcare, isolation, cost of housing, climate, lack of housing, competition from other employers and “spousal satisfaction.”

Among the ideas suggested for recruitment by those interviewed for the study:

“Provide more information for out-of-state recruits about the region.”

“Expand local university programs to meet region needs.”

“Increase wages” and “locally based programs.”

Those surveyed also had ideas for stemming the high turnover, including providing an opportunity for the local labor market to develop needed skills to stay in the region, increase wages, more affordable cost of living and providing more childcare options.

Carey said the survey showed the need for many training programs, and in a world where money is no object, she would expand the programs of the University of Alaska-Southeast so more Alaskans could become nurses, technicians, physical and occupational therapists, and doctors. (The survey said 92 percent of health care organizations in the region say registered nurse is a “difficult” position to fill, and 64 percent said it’s “very difficult.”) The study also said additional 543 registered nurses will be needed in the next five years, because of high turnover in the field.

Carey said starting or expanding such programs is expensive, and with the university facing three straight years of massive cuts, now is not the time.

But there are other needs, and options that are more affordable, and to that end UAS will get started in one area: behavioral health education, with a goal of providing a needed service and, in a way, getting students to continue on in the field.

Carey, who came to the state from California, said one of the needs she noticed when she arrived more than three years ago was for more behavioral health workers, both in larger and more remote communities. University faculty at Fairbanks, Anchorage and especially UAS agreed that it was a great need. The goal would be to program to train “that first person someone in crisis might talk to.”

“Get that person the help they might need, an on-the-ground person,” Carey says. “They know someone that might be struggling, offer them a hand and guide them in the direction where they can get the help they need.”

The first course, Introduction to Behavioral Health, will be offered this fall. The goal is to offer a certificate program, and make it available online. We hope our hope is, is we can grow it into an associate’s degree, and then hopefully students would be interested in going into social work or psychology, or some other helping field” she said.

Although many higher-level courses are offered only at UAA and UAF, online offerings are expanding, Carey said.

“What we’re trying to do is allow a student who lives in Southeast or Ketchikan, or Sitka — they can complete their undergraduate online, with their certificate, their associates, their degrees, and then participate in their own community, because we think if students are able to take programs right where they live, they’re going to be much more likely to stay in their communities and contribute to their communities,” she said. “Once a student gets to Fairbanks, or Anchorage or out of state, they tend to stay in those places. And we want them to be in their communities.”