

More rural nurses needed

The philosopher Joseph Campbell said, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself."

DR. DEE SWANSON



MY TURN

COVID-19 has shown us that nurses are precisely that. And we urgently need more of them.

COVID-19 exposed the dire need for more healthcare workers in rural areas. Nearly 80 million people live in health professional shortage areas — areas where there

are more than 3,500 patients for a single primary care provider. This shortage means no prevention screening, immunizations or basic care for infections and sicknesses.

Making matters worse, our rural hospitals were hit hardest during this health crisis. Texas leads the nation in hospital closures with 26 lost since 2010. Nationally, more than 70 rural hospitals have closed in the same time frame. We are headed toward a healthcare provider crisis in rural Texas.

Although nursing is the nation's largest healthcare profession, the need for more nurses across the state will continue for many years. In the absence of physicians, nurse practitioners, who represent one in four providers in rural areas, are serving the primary care needs of residents in remote parts of the state.

But as Texas Public Radio reports, "Demand for all types (of nurses) will likely exceed Texas' healthcare workforce supply by the end of the decade, with a labor deficit of 59,970 registered nurses alone." And one of the most significant contributors to the shortage? "A lack of nursing graduate degrees and educators."

The state legislature has taken great strides to address this challenge by implementing several major statewide initiatives over the past 20 years, such as the Nursing Innovation Grant Program; the authorization of specific community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees in nursing, and Professional Nursing Shortage Reduction Program, which is being reviewed by an advisory committee of public and private nursing programs to recommend programmatic changes for the next legislative session.

However, as we re-open our economy and face a new age of social distancing, increasing the ranks of qualified nurses becomes even tougher, especially as colleges and universities struggle to adjust.

But we cannot slow down the development of qualified nurses. It has to speed up. The year 2020 is the Year of the Nurse, and it's the perfect time to consider innovative ways to help augment one of our country's most important professions.

In an era of expanding technology, online education is key. The old limitation of a physical location at a specific time is alleviated with virtual

learning.

Online universities like WGU Texas are proving just that. The 100-percent online, state-endorsed university has the second-largest nursing school in the state, and in 2019, its bachelor of science in nursing pre-licensure graduates had an astounding 100% passage rate for the National Council Licensure Examination.

Expanding virtual education programs in high-demand professions like nursing means expanding high-speed internet access and adoption. The Texas Legislature must find ways to close the digital divide so that more people — particularly in rural and underserved areas — have access to the affordable, high-quality education they need to help fill the nursing gap in their communities.

Aristotle wrote, "Education is an ornament in prosperity and a refuge in adversity." Online programs have been a refuge during this pandemic by providing the flexibility to learn while juggling work, family, and disruptions without compromising on quality or capacity.

As we recover and reorient to new realities — in healthcare and our economy — the innovative, dynamic nature of virtual education will be a foundation for providing the skills and knowledge that will carry us from adversity to prosperity.

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