



Fewer Nurses, Bigger Problems

By Judith VandeWater
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Nursing salaries in the St. Louis market have increased about 35 percent in five years, administrators say. And they're likely to continue rising because of fierce competition for registered nurses.

The competition isn't just among this area's hospitals. Pay rates in St. Louis, ranging from \$16.65 an hour for a new graduate to \$33 for an experienced staff nurse with advanced training, lag behind Chicago and Kansas City.

"There is increasing pressure coming from other parts of the country on this market," said Janette Taaffe, human-resources administrator at St. Luke's Hospital in Chesterfield. "Nurses are willing to move for jobs to some extent, so there is a greater awareness of what others are paying. We are trying to be competitive."

Demand simply is outpacing supply. Sigma Theta Tau International, a nursing honor society, estimates that by the end of the decade, 40 percent of working RNs will be 50 or older. Despite successful efforts to boost enrollment at nursing schools, the replacement pipeline as nurses retire will continue to fall significantly short. In addition, nursing schools face a prolonged shortage of teaching staff that's forcing them to turn away applicants.

Several large St. Louis-area hospitals have managed to chip away at vacancy rates, but the help-wanted ads still are full of opportunities for registered nurses as well as other hospital-based professionals, including therapists and pharmacists.

Ads on billboards, buses, televisions and radios clamor for that rare and valued entity - a registered nurse actively seeking employment.

Hospitals recruit constantly to keep up with attrition. Those that spend enough money to stand out from the pack probably are expanding services.

A television campaign by St. John's Mercy Medical Center features seasoned nurses talking about their fulfilling careers. The intent is to recruit professionals as well as to raise visibility for new and expanded services that make the added staffing necessary, said Chris Crain, chief nurse executive.

St. John's strives to remain competitive with wages and benefits, Crain said. And in St. Louis, that requires generous college-loan repayment programs, tuition reimbursement, flexible hours and professional challenges.

Also, local hospitals offer hefty signing bonuses to entice nurses fresh out of school and to raid one another's staffs.

Barnes-Jewish Hospital, the area's largest hospital, has a signing offer of up to \$6,000 until the end of the year. The enhanced bonus started Sept. 1 with a goal of recruiting 100 registered nurses.

As of Nov. 1, the hospital had met 85 percent of that goal. It gives much of the credit to a matching bonus it pays to staffers for referrals. Nurses moving from other BJC HealthCare facilities to Barnes-Jewish aren't eligible for the signing bonus.

Barnes-Jewish juiced up its bonus to meet a goal of lowering its nurse-to-patient ratio.

"Our idea was to make this short and sweet, finish off hiring and get on with the great stuff," said Coreen Vlodych, vice president of patient-care services.

St. Louis University Hospital pays up to \$10,000 for a successful referral that plugs a hard-to-fill position.

Mary Jane Brecklin, director of recruitment and retention services for SSM Health Care-St. Louis, said employees refer about one in three new nurses. SSM pays up to \$5,000 when it offers a signing bonus. An ongoing program pays employees up to \$6,000 for referring a registered nurse who accepts a job.

SSM places a premium on retaining employees, Brecklin said. "The whole goal is to have a viable, stable work force."

The national turnover rate for registered nurses was 22 percent in 1999 when SSM Health Care, the corporate parent of SSM St. Louis, convened a system meeting to brainstorm ways to stabilize the nursing work force.

At the time, SSM looked good versus the national benchmark, and it has steadily improved. Its nursing-turnover rate dropped to 12.7 percent in 2000 and to 8.6 percent in 2003.

"You do it by developing programs that your employees want," Brecklin said.

Recognition, Respect

There's no end in sight to the national nursing shortage, but Missouri hospitals caught a break last year, largely because other sectors of the economy were ailing.

The Missouri Hospital Association's workplace report for August credited "increased efforts to promote health careers" with contributing to short-term stability in the sector's work force. "However, the long-term outlook is bleak," the report said.

Recently, the Illinois Hospital Association mailed a questionnaire to its member hospitals, asking about staffing levels in 2003. Danny Chun, an association spokesman, expects members to report that the nursing shortage is an ongoing challenge.

With new hires so hard to come by and the cost of turnover estimated by the Missouri Hospital Association at 100 percent of salary, local hospitals are trying to keep staffers happy and satisfied. Their efforts aim to create a professional environment that recognizes and respects competence.

St. Louis University Hospital, an urban academic medical center, pays nurses a retention bonus of 6 percent of their annual salary. The bonus recognizes "the contributions to patient care made by an experienced and loyal nursing staff," spokeswoman Susan Hakes said.

Vlodarchyk, of Barnes-Jewish, said she created the position of chief retention officer in the spring and appointed long-time employee Shawn Ray to identify and address the reasons that nurses quit. The goal is to reach them before they leave and offer opportunities that persuade them to stay.

"Since the first of May, she has saved three or four people from leaving," Vlodarchyk said.

Barnes-Jewish has a nursing-vacancy rate of 14.6 percent. But the hospital increased that rate by design in January when it decided to add beds and lower its nurse-to-patient ratio, Vlodarchyk said.

The vacancy rate is slightly below the national average of 15 percent, but it's well above the single-digit rates at some suburban hospitals.

Vlodarchyk began a program to train nurse managers to be more appreciative of their staffs. It's based on work by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans, co-authors of *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*.

A hug or handshake can go a long way in making workers feel valued, she said.

"Sometimes there are really bad days in hospitals," Vlodarchyk said. "People work really hard. Some days are just wild, so the manager is key."

Jan Hess, administrator for customer relations at St. Luke's, said making an employee feel valued can be as basic as saying thank you. The hospital, which boasts a 4 percent nurse-vacancy rate, gives movie passes as tokens of appreciation. Simple things "done frequently and sincerely" work, she said.

St. Luke's calls meetings to keep employees engaged and in the loop. Theme parties at lunch keep them energized, she said.

Also, the hospital takes pragmatic steps to reward loyalty, Hess said. It's mindful of salary compression and makes sure nurses aren't financially penalized for long service.

Taaffe said St. Luke's rewards employees who cross the 25-year threshold with a cake, a coupon for a chair massage and recognition at employee meetings.

St. Anthony's Medical Center pays all employees who meet milestone anniversaries, defined in five-year increments, a cash bonus of \$50 for each year of employment.

First Impressions

Laura Tucker, 21, of House Springs, is one of the newest nursing hires at St. Anthony's.

Tucker, who will graduate from the University of Missouri at St. Louis next month with a bachelor's degree in nursing, has accepted a full-time job at the hospital in south St. Louis County.

She started thinking about where she wanted to work and what she wanted to do the moment she entered nursing school. "There are so many opportunities, it is unreal," Tucker said.

St. Anthony's recruiters encouraged her to interview with other local hospitals and promised to beat any competing offers. She intended to do that but never did.

Tucker won't reveal her starting wage, but the hospital will pay off up to \$20,000 in student loans at \$5,000 a year, she said. She has \$16,000 of such debt.

But she took the job because she likes the environment. "All the nurses are so helpful."

Dan Lauer, a night-shift nurse at St. Joseph Health Center in St. Charles, graduated in May with an associate's degree in nursing from St. Charles Community College.

In his first year as a registered nurse, he will earn about 60 percent of what he previously made as a graphic designer. Lauer, 35, created cruise-line advertising, but he was laid off in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Unable to find an art job, he was struck by the number of openings in health care. He took a job at St. Joseph as a nurse's aide and went to school. When he completed his RN training, he decided to stay.

"Being new to the profession, I really feel like SSM is going above and beyond to prepare us graduate nurses to be ready to work in this field. The people and the training have made it satisfying. I feel very appreciated," Lauer said.

"Ultimately, you are spending your day in interaction with the patient instead of a boss," he said. "That makes it rewarding."

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Health executives say the growing shortage of registered nurses might be the greatest challenge they face. "Health Care's Human Crisis: The American Nursing Shortage," a 2002 report by Bobbi Kimball and Edward O'Neil, says the labor shortage is compounded by these factors:

- An aging population that will use more health care.
- An aging nursing force that will move from hospitals to less physically demanding jobs.
- Expanded career options for registered nurses in managed care, pharmaceuticals and biomedical research.
- A work environment made stressful by fewer resources and unfilled positions.
- The short time nurses have to establish relationships with patients.
- Feelings of frustration from having little authority to foster positive change in complex health systems.

Reporter Judith VandeWater

E-mail: jvandewater@post-dispatch.com

Phone: 314-340-8201