

A RESPONSE TO

# THE FUTURE OF THE HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE IN SOUTH CENTRAL/SOUTHWEST WISCONSIN: An Analysis of Employer and Employee Surveys in Key Locations

By Janice K. Bultema, RN, MSN

The July 2006 Seeds of Workforce Change report, produced by the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, predicted that the number of 65-year olds in the state will approach the number of 18-year olds in about 15 years. The same report indicated that even though Dane County has the highest education attainment in the state (and ranks among the highest in the nation), 59% of its population 25 years old or older does not have a four-year college degree, and 84% of the 25 year old or older population in the other counties in South Central-South Western Wisconsin does not have a four-year college degree.

This report gave us a valuable profile of the workforce and reminded us that health care employment only represents 9% of the jobs in our area. So how does the health care industry compete now and in the future and ensure that we have the workforce we need to provide safe, quality patient care?

The Retirement and Departure Survey conducted this year signals the destination for us. The positions we need to focus on are: registered nurses, nursing assistants, 4-year degree medical technologists, LPNs, physical therapists and assistants, and medical assistants. But what path do we need to take to reach our destination?

I see three priorities:

**Focused development** - We need to steer the employees who embody our values and vision to pursue the careers I mentioned. This may include offering specific programs to help them get ready to return to school. For example, at UW Hospital and Clinics, we offer three levels of English as a second language. We also offer a School at Work program, a 32-week guided program that includes course content in medical terminology, reading, writing, professionalism, math, and as the graduates tell me each year, more math and more math. Since we've offered this program, many of the graduates have been promoted or entered programs at Madison Area Technical College. The program gave them the confidence they needed to do something they could have done before, but did not have the confidence.

**Retention** -We also need to look at how to keep people in the workforce longer. Eventually the economy will recover and people will again start thinking about early retirement. The top reasons for retiring right now, according to the Retirement and Departure survey, are job stress/pressure, reaching appropriate and eligible retirement age, desire to pursue leisure activities, and physical demands of the job. To address three of these, we need to consider more creative, flexible work arrangements. Right now we all have a high percent of employees working part time, but we may need to explore what flexibility really means to our employees. Responding to the physical demands is going to require not just thinking outside of the box, but exploding the box.

**Collaboration with education institutions** - Each academic organization has its own financial, resource, and space limitations. They also have a full academic portfolio that meets the educational needs of multiple professions. How are we as health care employers going to partner to meet and escalate our needs when we comprise only 9% of the workforce? How are we going to shape the academic programs to meet the region's needs as well as the unique needs of each health care organization? It will require a new kind of collaboration, one where we set competition and self interests aside and respond to the greater needs of patients throughout Wisconsin.

This response was written by Janice Bultema, RN, MSN, Vice President of Human Resources, University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics. Bultema also serves as chair of the Madison Area Technical College District Board.

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