

The Healthcare Workforce Shortage: how it affects Mohave County and what legislators are doing about it

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House Representative Selina Bliss has proposed a bill that establishes a Health Care Workforce Advisory Council as well as an Arizona Health Care Workforce Investment Fund that would address the healthcare workforce shortage in Arizona.

“As of January 2022, Arizona ranked among the top 5 states with the most severe healthcare staffing shortages,” reads a press release from the Arizona State Board of Nursing.

Among those most affected by the healthcare workforce shortage are Arizona’s rural communities including Mohave County.

According to a report released from the Arizona Department of Health Services on medically underserved areas in Arizona, Mohave County is home to a number of underserved areas including Lake Havasu City, Bullhead City, Kingman, Golden Valley, Colorado City and the Hualapai Tribe.



Phil Fitzgerald, CEO for Havasu Regional Medical Center in Lake Havasu City and Valley View Regional Medical Center in Bullhead City, said that staffing shortages are a challenge that his hospitals have faced for years.

“Every range of departments is experiencing some type of shortage,” Fitzgerald said. “We’re not able to open as many beds as we have before. We can’t bring in as many patients as we would like to - people who are trying to access our facility for care, so we do

have to send some of those patients outside of their own support area.”

Fitzgerald said that there are a number of reasons why Mohave County is facing a healthcare workforce shortage including the cost of living in the area.

“The area that we’re in; it’s hard. The cost of living has something to do with it, too,” Fitzgerald said. “Some of those middle wage earners - it’s hard to attract them because the cost is so high.”

To address this, Fitzgerald said that he has met with developers in the area to discuss building affordable housing.

“It’s a multi-pronged issue as far as bringing them in, and then once they’re here, retaining them,” Fitzgerald said.

Dan Derksen, director of the Arizona Center for Rural Health, said that a big contributor to the lack of a healthcare workforce is Arizona’s rapid population growth.

“Our population has grown very rapidly,” Derksen said. “Arizona has been in the top five states for population growth for a number of years. We just haven’t kept up with the rapid population growth. States that have grown rapidly like Arizona since, have gotten further and further behind on their graduate medical education residency slots.”

HRMC has taken multiple steps to try and create more medical education and residency positions by partnering with Mohave Community College and Arizona State University.

“We’re partnering with different academic institutions in the area, ASU being one that we’ve been able to pull some talent out and some staff that are coming into the workforce,” Fitzgerald said. “We put together a very robust nurse extern program. I think we’ve hired more than 68 nurses this year alone.”

Nursing positions have been some of the hardest to fill in Arizona. Therefore, the AZBN implemented the Student Nurse/New Graduate Clinical Placements & Preceptor Training Pilot Grant Program last year. This program provides funds to different healthcare institutions that are prepared to implement a nursing preceptor program.

“The primary goal of the Grant Program is to combat the nursing shortage in Arizona by increasing the number of qualified nurses and nursing assistants in the state,” reads the press release. “The AZBN has received significant funding of \$25 million annually for three years from the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) to address this challenge.”

Currently, over \$20 million has been allocated, with HRMC being one of the recipients.

Kathy Malloch, grant consultant for AZBN, said that she believes one of the biggest reasons there’s a nursing shortage is due to nurses being overworked.

“They get burned out and are leaving the profession,” Malloch said. “We think we’ll have a shortage of about 25,000 nurses in the next five years.”

According to Malloch, each program is assessed at the end of each year to see if they will continue to receive funding the next year.

“We meet with each program every month,” Malloch said. “The enthusiasm and the commitment of the grantees is incredible and they’re already accomplishing a lot.”

Fitzgerald said that their nurse training and extern program has been incredibly beneficial to the hospital.

“We’re basically hiring them before they’re even nurses and they are working up on the floor so they get a good sense of what they’re coming into,” Fitzgerald said. “We graduate them from a nurse extern to our residency program where they get a year of continued education and schooling.”

In another effort to address the healthcare workforce shortage, Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema co-sponsored a bill titled the Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act. This would allow unused visas from prior years to be used by doctors and nurses.

“That’s a creative way to solve this problem so that rural communities can get access to the healthcare that they need,” Sinema said.

According to Sinema, this bill would not increase the number of immigrants who come to U.S., nor would it displace any American employees.

“For Arizona to remain competitive and address critical shortages of physicians and other healthcare workers, it will be crucial to implement policies that not only attract and retain global talent that is complementary to the U.S.-born workforce, but that also builds career pathways for immigrants who already call the state home,” reads a report from the American Immigration Council. “Although there is a growing need for healthcare workers in Arizona, many immigrants who have received specialized education, training, and licensing abroad are unable to practice in the state, facing challenges such as recredentialing and language proficiency. Their skillsets are all too often underutilized — in what is known as “brain waste” — which frequently leads to under- or unemployment.”

While HRMC still faces staffing shortages, Fitzgerald said that the hospital has seen some improvements from the previous year.

“We’ve been able to open up 30 more beds than we did last year,” Fitzgerald said. “We’ve made some significant improvements in our turnover rate from the prior year to this year. I think we were somewhere in the neighborhood of 28% turnover the previous year. This year we’re down to 14%, so we’re able to retain that staff a little bit more.”

Fitzgerald also said that in order to make this progress, they have relied on state dollars, and will continue to support legislation that would help address the healthcare workforce shortage, and Bliss’s bill does just that.

House bill 2171 states that Arizona Health Care Workforce Advisory Council would have the goal of addressing healthcare workforce shortages in the state. The council would consist of one representative from a dental insurer, the director of the Department of Health Services, the director of AHCCCS, one representative from the state organization that represents physicians, one representative from the state organization that represents nurses, one representative from the state organization that represents behavioral healthcare, one representative from the state organization that represents dentists, two representatives from organizations in the state that represent hospitals, the president of each of the universities that are under the jurisdiction of the Arizona Board of Universities, one representative from the state organization that represents community colleges and one representative from each private college in the state that has a physical campus and on-site instruction that trains healthcare workers.

According to the bill, the council will meet to discuss the best way to disperse the money in the Arizona Health Care Workforce Investment Fund.

House bill 2171 will be heard in this year’s legislative session and more information can be found at <https://www.azleg.gov/legtext/56leg/2R/bills/HB2171P.pdf>.

Fitzgerald said that although they have made some progress from last year, HRMC and Valley View will continue to pursue different avenues to address the healthcare workforce shortage as they are still not where they would like to be.

“It has been a challenge over the last three years,” Fitzgerald said. “It’s still going to continue to be a challenge. This is a hard-to-recruit area. It’s hard to bring people into the rural area. It’s not only bringing them in, but how do we make sure that they stay here, and they are a part of our community.”