Hospitals put cash up front: Lab workers wanted

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by Susan L. Thomas

Hoping to head off a worsening labor shortage, the Hospital Council of Northern & Central California is leading a campaign to raise $5 million to train clinical laboratory science workers.

The Healthcare Laboratory Workforce Initiative, formed by several California hospital associations last year, seeks to raise the money over the next five years. The Abbott Fund, a nonprofit foundation established by health care giant Abbott Laboratories, made the first contribution: $100,000 to fund grants for clinical laboratory science programs at San Jose State University and San Francisco State University.

The coalition plans to spend the money as it comes in to fund educational grants and scholarships, promote the field to students, and to raise public awareness of the contributions lab professionals make to health care, according to Rebecca Rozen, regional vice president of the hospital council, which is based in Walnut Creek. She said the campaign will be similar to those that have drawn attention to the nursing shortage.

The hospital groups cite health care work force studies that show the state will need nearly 700 clinical laboratory scientists per year for the next five years as the population ages and lab workers retire. Existing educational programs are expected to graduate 225 students annually.

Other clinical lab workers, such as phlebotomists and mid-level practitioners, also are in short supply.

Only eight programs in the state train clinical laboratory scientists, a senior level of lab worker certification that requires a bachelor’s degree and an additional one-year program of specialized study, according to a report published by the UC-San Francisco Center for the Health Professions in 2003.

Health professionals attribute the closure of clinical laboratory science programs, which include a significant laboratory component, to the high cost of operating them and disinterest among potential students.

In 2001, California had 76 clinical laboratory science workers per 100,000 residents. That compared with 102 nationally, ranking California as No. 43 among the 50 states in the number of clinical lab workers per capita, according to the UCSF report.

The shortage is particularly acute in less populated regions of central and northern California. Five clinical laboratory science programs are in the Los Angeles area, compared
with three in Northern California, including those at San Francisco State University, San Jose State University and UC-Davis Medical Center.

Alice Villanueva, John Muir Health’s vice president of human resources, said the shortage of clinical lab professionals is affecting the entire health care industry. There are simply not enough medical technologists entering the field to keep pace with the demand, she said.

The hospital has focused on retaining clinical lab workers and encouraging further education. It has offered scholarships, student loan forgiveness, work study programs and on-site education sessions. It also has considered flexible work schedules and other initiatives specifically targeted at retaining experienced workers.

Health professionals and the initiative’s backers say a shortage of clinical laboratory workers in the future could mean longer waits for lab results, more crowding in hospital emergency departments and possibly the closure of some labs in rural areas.

UCSF’s study also concludes the shortage could cause hospitals financial hardship as they send lab samples to external labs for testing, potentially losing out on reimbursements.

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