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Immigrant nurse program expands into East Bay

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St. Rose patient Ann Vares gets some help from nurses Maureen Appel, left, and Yongchuan Ruan of China.

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A program to train immigrant nurses so they can work as health professionals in California hospitals has expanded into the East Bay.

The Immigrant Nurse Re-Entry Program, which helps foreign nurses navigate the U.S. system to obtain English, cultural and clinical skills, has been operating in San Francisco for 15 years as a partnership between Jewish Vocational Service and **City College San Francisco**.

The program is aimed at helping fill an existing shortage as the growing demand for nurses at hospitals in the state is expected to worsen over the next 20 years. In particular, there is a need for workers with language and cultural skills to serve California's diverse populations.

The current shortage of nurses in California is somewhere between 6,872 and 21,161 full-time equivalent registered nurses, according to a 2008 report about the state's nurse labor force authored by the **Center for the Health Professions** at UC-San Francisco. The shortage is expected to worsen every year through 2030, when it will be somewhere between 99,945 and 122,223 full-time equivalent nurses.

In June, the Immigrant Nurse program's first East Bay class started at **Chabot College** in Hayward, with nurses from countries as varied as South Korea, the Philippines and Germany. The registered nurse refresher course is geared at nurses who have passed the **National Council of State Boards of Nursing** examination but need help with their English or brushing up on some skills.

The program also helps nurses enroll in courses to fill the gaps in their own education, and to do the necessary paperwork to pass the registered nurse or licensed vocational nurse exam in California.

The nurse re-entry program is being funded in Alameda County through a \$300,000, two-year grant from the **Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative**, a public-private

partnership of more than a dozen philanthropic foundations and the state of **California Employment Development Department**. These funds, which are going to Jewish Vocational Service, mainly pay for case management services provided by the agency to help students navigate the system and enroll in classes.

Alameda County Supervisor Alice Lai Bitker helped secure funding and first talked to Jewish Vocational Service about bringing the program to the East Bay, where the need for minority nurses is underscored by the area's diverse population.

"She was an immigrant herself and hearing that hospitals were paying a lot of money for travel nurses," said John Halpin, deputy director for Jewish Vocational Service. "We help immigrant nurses get the paperwork and enroll in nursing courses."

The East Bay program includes a clinical training component at **St. Rose Hospital** in Hayward and **Eden Medical Center** in Castro Valley.

"These nurses need a lot of acculturation to the American hospital environment," said Myrna Bowman, who is teaching this first course at Chabot College. Also in the works is a class starting in September to help nurses meet the psychiatry nursing requirement of the board exam, and a class starting in January to train licensed vocational nurses. Another registered nurse refresher course is planned next years.

In some cases, the nurses need practice receiving verbal orders in English from physicians and executing them, Bowman said, or performing tasks that in their home countries were not carried out by nurses. For instance, in some countries, physicians and not nurses administer intravenous drugs, and in some countries families and not nurses feed and bathe patients.

The program in San Francisco sees 75 percent pass rates, Halpin said.

"For a hospital like St. Rose, it is helpful to have some nurses who understand some of the culture and care issues" in other countries, said Michael Mahoney, St. Rose CEO. "Schools are having a hard time producing them. When we have qualified nurses who may have been initially trained in another country, a re-entry program is another option."

Other organizations involved with the program include the **Oakland Career and Education Center** and the English Center, which offer classes in English, computer skills and career readiness. The **San Francisco Welcome Back Center**, which retrains immigrant health care workers, is sending referrals to the program. Also involved are the **Regional Health Occupation Center** at City College San Francisco, which focuses on programs to develop the health care work force, and **Alameda County Medical Center** in Oakland.