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WKU nursing school receives \$479,000 grant to address shortage

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WKU School of Nursing

Western Kentucky University's School of Nursing and Allied Health is the recipient of a \$479,000 grant aimed at reducing the nursing shortage in the state.

The Healthcare Workforce Collaborative, a \$10 million initiative funded by the state legislature to solve Kentucky's health care crisis, awarded the grant. The Healthcare Workforce Collaborative is a subset of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

In late 2021, Gov. Andy Beshear declared a state of emergency after data showed the nursing shortage reaching critical levels.



“There’s been a nursing shortage since it seems like forever, but the pandemic exacerbated that,” said Dr. Mary Bennett, director of WKU’s School of Nursing and Allied Health.

The Kentucky Nurses Association said the state has a 12-20% shortage and this will likely only worsen as a mass exodus of health care workers continues.

WKU is one of several of the state’s public universities to receive grant money from the Healthcare Workforce Collaborative.

Awards were based on initial funding of \$200,000 plus additional funding determined by how many degrees applicable to frontline health care professions were produced by each university in previous years.

An average of 153 students in WKU’s bachelors of science in nursing program have graduated in each of the past five years. The school’s associate degree also produced an average of 94 graduates.

WKU’s School of Nursing and Allied Health will use the grant to create more spots for eligible nursing applicants, recruit potential nursing students in local schools and pay part-time faculty who accompany students when they go into teaching hospitals, Bennett said.

To attract future students, WKU partners with the South Central Kentucky Area Education Center, a grant-funded organization that works to create a local educational pipeline in health fields. The AHEC is housed at WKU but serves 22 counties, Center Director Catherine Malin said.

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“Our whole focus is decreasing the nursing shortage,” Malin said. “The grant was a natural fit for our mission.”

WKU’s partnership with the AHEC involves classroom and after-school programming tailored to student interests and debunking pervasive misinformation about the nursing field. Many students consider nursing “less important and less desirable than a male-centered profession,” Bennett said.

They don’t realize how broad or lucrative a nursing career can be, depending on the specialty, education level or workplace, she said. Nurses can work anywhere in the United States and shift jobs easily because of high demand.

“I think people put all nursing levels in one boat,” Bennett said. “They’re not looking at the bottom line.”

Recruiting early allows students to consider nursing earlier and design class schedules that will prepare them for a nursing degree before they step on WKU’s campus.

WKU's School of Nursing and Allied Health is also launching an accelerated program, master entry professional nursing, in which students with any bachelor's degree can earn their master's degree and become a registered nurse in two years. The University of Louisville is the only other school with a similar program in the state.

Bennett said the grant and all of the initiatives it will fund will better both WKU and the community.

"It's a common good," she said.

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