



# Fortifying The Front Lines In Healthcare

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**F**lorida would be significantly worse off if it weren't for our brave nurses who have worked tirelessly and put themselves at risk to care for others during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the events of the past year and a half, imagine how unsettling it would be if we did not have enough nurses to care for the needs of Floridians. Unfortunately, this is a reality we are now facing. The United States is running out of nurses.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, we will need an additional 1.1 million nurses to meet demands by 2022. By 2025, the nursing shortage will be a real crisis.

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing explains that "a large percentage of the current workforce is nearing retirement age, nursing school enrollment is not growing fast enough, and there is also a shortage of people to teach future nurses."

On September 20, hospital administrators in Florida testified before the Florida House Health & Human Services Committee and the House Pandemics & Public Emergencies Committee on how COVID-19 has exacerbated the shortage and accelerated the need for a stronger nursing workforce.

Floridians are either walking away from nursing, leaving the bedside or becoming travel nurses who get paid large sums to take their talents to COVID-19 hotspots. As a result, the nursing shortage is putting many of Florida's health care systems in a bind.

According to the Florida Hospital Association, 70 percent of hospitals in Florida are currently experiencing critical staffing shortages.

"This is really one of the great existential threats to our ability to continue to deliver healthcare," said Neil Finkler, chief clinical officer of AdventHealth Orlando. "This is not sustainable. It limits consistency. It limits our mentoring capability. It limits team building, and it limits a lot of the things that we have done to improve the quality of care that we provide."

High quality and accessible health care is essential to the quality of life in our state. A strong workforce of qualified nurses is a critical component to that. We must find a solution – and fast.

When asked by lawmakers what Florida can do to help the hospitals tackle the challenges they face, Finkler answered: "We need more students. We need more professors. We need more seats."

Education plays an important role in training up the next generation of nurses, and independent colleges and universities

across Florida, or ICUF schools in particular, are critical to strengthen the nursing workforce in Florida.

ICUF schools are independent and market-driven, responding to the needs of the students and the workforce. Of the 30 private, nonprofit institutions in Florida, nearly half of them offer nursing degrees.

One-quarter of Florida's nursing degrees come from ICUF schools. In 2020, this amounted to 3,600 nursing degrees, ranging from associate degrees through doctoral. These registered nurses and nurse practitioners are ready for the workforce. Some of them are professors ready to teach the generations of nurses that follow.

Fortunately, students in Florida have greater access to higher education through ICUF schools with the support of school vouchers. The Effective Access to Student Education (EASE) voucher helps Florida residents pay for their tuition at Florida's independent, nonprofit higher education institutions. It allows students to make the choice that's best for them.

The EASE voucher is an incredible investment for the taxpayer, especially as the state continues to look for ways to increase nursing degrees to meet our workforce needs.

The EASE voucher is far less expensive than the taxpayer-funded subsidies that support students at public institutions. Students who qualify for EASE vouchers receive \$2,841 per year to reduce the burden of tuition at their private institutions. The state subsidy for students at public universities is nearly five-times that, or \$14,000, and the state subsidy for students at state colleges is more than two times that, or \$7,000.

The program also enables students who may not otherwise have access to a postsecondary institution. Half of the students receiving an EASE voucher come from families who bring home less than \$60,000 in annual income. In addition, 40 percent of first-time, full-time undergraduates at independent colleges and universities receive Pell grants.

By earning their degrees at Florida's private, nonprofit colleges and universities, students are effectively breaking barriers to earn higher incomes. Of the top seven higher education institutions in Florida based on graduates' average starting salary, six of them are independent colleges and universities.

The data indicate our state's nursing shortage is a systemic challenge needing a holistic policy approach, or it will only get worse. Hospital administrators have revealed the system-wide impacts of this shortage. Our nurses on the front lines of the pandemic are stretched mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

If we can hope to maintain a high quality, accessible and affordable health care system in America's third largest state with 22 million residents, we must address this challenge now. Thankfully, Florida has both the network of institutions and the policy tools to make headway in the battle ahead.