

WAR POET

For 85-year-old Joseph Morici, every day is Memorial Day
City/Region, B1

Track triumphs

Marshfield's boys win the 5A state title while South Eugene's Lindsay Beard vaults to victory
Sports, C1

SALES TRIPS

A family starts a business selling crafts from Asia to finance their travels
Oregon Life, G1

The Sunday Register-Guard

EUGENE, OREGON

MAY 25, 2008

\$1.50



80

LCC nursing graduates annually

149

Job openings for nurses in Lane County annually

41

Percent of all current Oregon RNs expected to retire by 2025

50+

Age of almost half of Oregon's current RNs

1 million

Number of Oregonians over age 65 as of 2005

\$68,990

Average annual salary of RNs in Oregon

PART ONE OF A TWO-DAY SERIES

OREGON NURSING CONDITION CRITICAL



BRIAN DAVIES/The Register-Guard

Ann Burdic works as a medical assistant while trying to get into the Lane Community College nursing program, which due to a lack of space must turn away a majority of applicants despite a critical need for nurses.

Jobs: A nursing shortage looms, but colleges have limited openings

By GREG BOLT
The Register-Guard

Mark Sink wants to be a nurse so much he says he'll sell his house to do it. Sink, of Eugene, is one of perhaps hundreds of students statewide who in spite of hard work and good grades has been turned away from community college nursing programs not once but several times. It's not because he's not good enough or unwilling to sacrifice; it's because the programs simply don't have room to admit more than a small fraction of those who qualify for a nursing education.

That shortage could hurt the state down the line. State data and studies by nursing organizations suggest Oregon could have 5,000 fewer nurses than it needs by the year 2025, when the baby boom generation is expected to put huge demand on the health care system.

Sink, 38, wants to be part of the solution. Five years ago, he quit a well-paying job with Whittier

Please turn to **NURSES**, Page A8

Numbers: Increase in graduates is not enough to meet demand ahead

By GREG BOLT
The Register-Guard

Nursing education in Oregon is a numbers game, and right now the state is losing. In 2005, nursing programs in Oregon had to turn down three qualified applicants for every one they accepted, largely because they didn't have enough room. In 2007, that number overall had grown to five rejections for every acceptance, and for some schools the number is much higher.

And that's in spite of the fact that from 2001 to 2007 the state increased the number of nursing graduates by 80 percent. Community colleges alone increased the number of new nurses they graduate by 82 percent.

But it won't be enough, according to state employment trend data and the Oregon Center for Nursing.

To replace nurses who will retire and to handle job growth, the state is expected to need 15,700

Please turn to **EDUCATION**, Page A8



BRIAN DAVIES/The Register-Guard

Mark Sink, who has been trying for five years to get into the LCC nursing program, studies.

TOMORROW

◆ Paying for a college nursing program can be tough too

Love it or hate it, cost of gas fuels reactions

Some rethink holiday plans, while others drive on as price at the pump nears \$4

By BOB ALBRECHT
The Register-Guard

For one local resident, and perhaps only one, \$4 a gallon for gasoline isn't high enough.

Bring on \$5, said Jim Trezona, a maintenance worker at the University of Oregon, while he waited in line with at least 50 cars Saturday to pay \$3.79 a gallon at the Costco gas station on Coburg Road.

"This is ridiculous," Trezona said, pointing to a black 4x4 truck in front of him, another to his left and several other large vehicles lined up in front of his red Toyota hatchback.

"In most of them there's only one person. We should all be riding with people. We should all have cars that weigh between 1,500 and 2,000 pounds."

While Trezona's desire for everyone to drive smaller cars with increased fuel efficiency presumably would help rein in oil prices at more than a \$135 a barrel, it isn't likely to happen anytime soon. And neither will lower prices, industry experts say.

Instead, prices are approaching and exceeding a mark that many people choose to whisper as though it constituted some sort of heresy — Shhh, \$4.

The average price in the Eugene-Springfield area recorded Saturday exceeded the state average by about a cent, coming in at \$3.94 for regular

\$3.94

Average price of gas in Eugene-Springfield area as of Saturday

Please turn to **PRICES**, Page A7

As rescue hopes dim, China says quake death toll may top 80,000

By TINI TRAN
The Associated Press

YINGXIU, China — China warned Saturday that the death toll from a massive earthquake two weeks ago could take a major leap and pass 80,000, suggesting the government may be giving up hope of finding more survivors.

But rescuers rushed anyway to reach 24 coal miners who officials said were trapped in three mines by the disaster, though it was not known if the miners were alive.

"We have had the miracle in the past that a miner was found alive after being trapped underground for 21 days," Wang Dexue, the deputy chief of the government's work safety department, told a news conference in Beijing. "We are carrying out rescue work on the assumption that they are still alive. We absolutely will not give up."

Wang gave no further details of

Please turn to **CHINA**, Page A9



Marine Sgt. Merlin German, badly burned in Iraq, died unexpectedly after routine surgery.



'Miracle' Marine's final battle an inspiration to many

By SHARON COHEN
The Associated Press

The young Marine came back from the war, with his toughest fight ahead of him.

Merlin German waged that battle in the quiet of a Texas hospital, far from the dusty road in Iraq where a bomb exploded, leaving him with burns over 97 percent of his body.

No one expected him to survive.

The burn victim braved dozens of surgeries before death finally claimed him

But for more than three years, he would not surrender. He endured more than 100 surgeries and procedures. He learned to live with pain, to stare at a stranger's face in the mirror. He learned to smile again, to

joke, to make others laugh.

He became known as the "Miracle Man."

But just when it seemed he

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ON THE WEB

◆ To watch video of three veterans telling their stories at U.S. war memorials in Washington, D.C., go to rgweb.registerguard.com/video/

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When choosing a baby sitter, an interview or a trial run can help put your mind at ease
Monday in Personal Life

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Nurses: Some students apply multiple times to get into LCC program

Continued from Page A1

Wood Products in Eugene to enroll at LCC with the goal of becoming a nurse. He took a lower-paying hospital job to help his chances of getting into a nursing program. He got top grades.

When LCC didn't accept him the first time, he took more classes and applied again. When he narrowly missed the cutoff a second time, he repeated the process. And a third time. And a fourth, each time missing admission by just one or two points despite having a 3.8 grade-point average.

This year, he applied to two community college nursing programs. He's taken the final essay exam at both and is waiting to hear if he's in.

And if he doesn't make it? This married father with a teenage daughter said he's prepared to sell his house so he can finance a seventh try.

"If it comes to that, that's what I'm going to do," Sink said a few days ago. "Because I'm telling you, there's somebody out there I'm supposed to take care of. I'm supposed to either save their life or make a difference in their life. There's something I'm supposed to do, and if it means selling my house to do it, then so be it."

Colleges short on funds

But financially strapped community colleges just don't have the money to create enough nursing slots.

State funding for Oregon's 17 two-year colleges has barely caught up to where it was before the state made deep cuts to higher education starting in 2002, and remains well behind that level when inflation is figured in. The state ranks 46th in the nation in per-student support of higher education.

To cope, Oregon community colleges have increased tuition an average of 60 percent; at LCC the cost has doubled. But that hasn't raised enough to replace lost state funding.

"We are up against the funding wall," said LCC President Mary Spilde. "We would need a lot of money to close that gap."

And that leaves costly programs such as nurse training in a bind.

It costs LCC \$11,379 a year to train a nursing student. But the college receives only \$6,474 per student in tuition, plus state funding, local taxes and other revenue.

That means it costs the college almost \$5,000 per nursing student per year more than it receives. Money to fill that gap comes from revenue generated by less costly classes.

Given that backdrop, LCC simply can't take in more nursing students, Spilde said.



BRIAN DAVIES/The Register-Guard

Lisa Nelson has struggled to get into Lane Community College's nursing program but has been unsuccessful.

Yet there are hundreds of good students lining up to take nursing who have already spent time and money preparing. Students may spend years and thousands of dollars on an unsuccessful quest to become a nurse, only to find the best they can do is get a lower-paying non-nursing job to help pay off big student loans.

Ann Burdic is one of them. She's wanted to be a nurse since she was a child, and now, at 25, she's spent the last four years earning a 3.85 GPA and preparing for the two-year nursing program at Lane Community College.

But she can't get in. "I am intelligent, motivated and a hard worker, yet I do not have the opportunity to succeed when there are so few positions open for RN training," said Burdic, who for four years in a row missed the cut for one of the few openings in LCC's nursing program. "There is a severe shortage of nurses and it is absolutely ludicrous that a person like me is repeatedly turned away from a community college."

Like many other community colleges in Oregon, LCC sometimes has to turn away four out of five qualified applicants for the 80 or so slots available each year. It often receives 400 applications for those spaces.

That's a problem shared by most of the 14 Oregon community colleges that offer a two-year nursing degree. These schools produce half the state's nursing graduates and are one of Oregon's best hopes of heading off a crisis.

That pipeline from community colleges has been cramped not only by the state's relatively low funding of higher education but also an exodus of nursing faculty who are retiring and crowded training laboratories and clinical space.

It's a problem that's play-

ing not just on the local stage, but on the national one. For months, Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have been declaring there's a very real shortage of nurses, and offering their solutions.

Regardless of political rhetoric, hundreds of Oregonians who want to be nurses are baffled and frustrated.

Students face tough competition

Community college nursing programs generally attract a different kind of student than the classic college freshman straight out of high school. Most are older, many are married or single parents, and nearly all work to support themselves.

Although nursing is considered a two-year program, students generally spend at least one year before that taking the required pre-requisite courses. The delay often stretches into two, three or even four years if they fail to qualify for a nursing program slot on their first try.

Competition for those slots is so fierce that students often take classes more than once to improve from a B to an A. Few students with more than two Bs in their nursing pre-requisites (grades in other classes aren't counted towards nursing admission) make it into the program.

"To get your foot in the door, you have to have a very strong GPA," said Jessica Alvorado, an academic counselor who works with LCC nursing candidates. "Anything that's not an A would be a blemish."

Catherine Diederich has been trying for three years to get into the LCC nursing program. She already has a bachelor's degree in sociology, but she realized she wanted something different and five years ago enrolled at LCC.

She's applied to the nurs-

ing program the past three years. Over that time she repeated three courses and has raised her GPA from 3.3 to 4.0 — good enough to make the first cut this year and be invited to take the essay exam.

"I thought it was going to be easier than it has been," she said, noting that application requirements have changed almost every year. "I feel like I've grown up a lot in this process, but it was very, very frustrating."

Alvorado said she's had students with 3.9 GPAs not make it into the program.

"That's tragic," she said. Many students earn those grades despite big challenges. Lisa Nelson is a 44-year-old single mother of four working two jobs and carrying 15 credits this term. She's applied to the nursing program three times without success.

Like many repeat nursing applicants, she's almost used up all the federal student aid she can get because she's taken so many classes while trying to get in. She doesn't even know how far in debt she is, and she was devastated when she failed to reach the essay test this year.

"I feel really hopeless because I feel I've wasted my time," she said. "I'll have taken all the classes that it's possible to take as of summer. I will have no more funding from the federal government because I've taken so many credits. And my life will not get any better because I went to school. It's really, really hard. Now I'm just a mess. I'm a wreck. And I'm trying so hard."

Problem leads to domino effect

The imbalance between nursing program applicants and available slots has other consequences as well. Many who don't get into nursing instead enroll in other health-care programs, leading to a domino effect as other students are unable to enter them.

Alvorado said many nursing candidates become so focused on trying to get into the program they refuse to consider other programs, such as dental assisting, respiratory care or medical imaging. But at some point, the cost of remaining in school with no guarantee they'll ever get into nursing leads many to choose an alternative.

But dental assisting and dental hygiene already are almost as competitive as nursing, and medical imaging isn't far behind. And Alvorado said programs such as respiratory care now fill up much faster than they used to.

"Respiratory care barely filled when I started at LCC in 2001," she said. "Then because of the overflow from nursing it was filling faster

and faster."

The program used to enroll 20 new students each year. Now it has so many high-achieving applicants some are put on a waiting list, which leaves fewer open slots and pushes up the GPA needed to get in. This year's class had only 11 openings because nine alternates from last year were guaranteed a spot this year.

In part to accommodate the overflow from nursing, LCC expanded its medical office assisting program from 30 slots a year to 48. It also added the physical therapy assistant program.

State officials allocate money

Alvorado said more students check in with counselors to discuss health careers than any other program. The 24,000 in-person contacts on health careers last year represented 27 percent of the total.

Nelson can't see herself as anything other than a nurse. "I want to become a nurse. I believe I was called to become a nurse," Nelson said. "I don't want to be a respiratory therapist. I don't want to be a medical office assistant. I want to be a nurse. This is supposed to be the home of the free and we're supposed to have all kinds of opportunities, and instead all my dreams are shattered right now."

Cathleen Coontz, workforce development coordinator for PeaceHealth, the parent organization of Sacred Heart Medical Center in Eugene, said there clearly are students who don't make the cut for space reasons who would be successful in the program and help fill the state's nursing shortage.

"Is there a valuable layer below that (cutoff) level? Without a doubt," she said. "If we could dip a little lower into that academic structure I would have no concerns."

Alvorado said nearly all of the 315 students who applied to LCC's nursing program have the grades and drive to do well.

"In an ideal world, of the 315, probably 300 of them, in my mind, should be able to find a place to go to school," she said. "This isn't the ideal

DEMAND RISING

- ◆ 2000: State had 22,000 full-time-equivalent RNs; demand existed for an additional 3,500 FTE RNs
- ◆ 2005: State had 24,800 RNs; demand existed for an additional 1,652 RNs.
- ◆ 2010: State will have 27,700 RNs; demand will exist for an additional 802 RNs.
- ◆ 2015: State will have 31,100 RNs; demand will exist for an additional 5,790 RNs.
- ◆ 2020: State will have 35,100 RNs; demand will exist for an additional 7,058 RNs.

world."

State officials recognize the problem. Legislators in the 2005 and 2007 sessions allocated some additional funding to help boost the health-care labor force, but education leaders say there's more that needs to be done.

"There remains a high level of concern about the people who are waiting and what more we can do," said Cam Preus, the director of the state Department of Community Colleges and Work Force Development. "Because there is such fierce competition, students are dismayed that they can't get in (to nursing programs). I wish it weren't so, but right now I don't have a magic bullet to solve it."

Sources: Oregon Center for Nursing, Oregon Employment Department; Reporting for this series was supported by the Hechinger Institute Community College Fellowship

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Education: Faculty shortage also a concern

Continued from Page A1

additional nurses by 2025. But that's about 5,000 more than it's expected to have.

"It is an issue that's going to impact us for some period of time," said Kris Campbell, director of the OCN, which was formed to help lead the state's response to the looming shortage. "We're not letting up at all, because the need is huge. Even if we doubled enrollment in our nursing programs, and we're close to that, it's still not all the nurses that we need."

While hospital care is likely to be affected in many places, particularly rural areas, the shortage will be especially acute at nursing homes, retirement centers and public health agencies.

Hospitals such as PeaceHealth's Sacred Heart and RiverBend will be less affected

because the area's quality of life and the higher wages paid by large hospitals make them prime draws for nurses. But that just makes it harder to staff retirement centers and nursing homes.

"Absolutely it's a tough job market," said Jeremy Tolman, director of the Creswell Care Center nursing home. "It's very difficult to compete with the hospitals."

But one place where the shortage may hit hardest is at nursing schools, the very places that are key to meeting the state's nursing needs. Campbell said that a recent OCN survey shows that the average age of nursing program faculty in Oregon is 53 and that almost 70 percent of them plan to retire by 2020.

Nurses need at least a master's degree to teach, and getting enough of them into graduate programs to just

replace retirees will be a challenge. And more faculty will be needed if nursing programs are to expand.

"The faculty shortage is huge," Campbell said. "That's the bugaboo to expanding programs."

Oregon is addressing that problem through the Oregon Consortium for Nursing Education, which gives students in community college nursing programs a direct path to a bachelor's degree from Oregon Health and Science University. That makes it easier for nurses to pursue the next step: a master's degree.

But Campbell said community colleges will remain a critical part of the pipeline as the state works to meet the demand for skilled health-care workers.

"They've always been important, because they serve their communities," she said.

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