

Mentors' TLC keeps nurses on the job

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Kaiser Permanente in Hayward is among seven hospitals in the state testing a nurse mentoring program run by the California Nurses Foundation.

Preliminary data from the foundation's pilot study at three hospitals found that nurses with mentors were less likely to quit. Some 35 percent of 310 non-participants left during a two-year study. Just 5 percent of 83 nurses with mentors left.

"It has made a difference in that (the nurses) have a person to talk to and not worry about their performance evaluation," said Winny Knowles, a lead nurse-mentor in the program at Kaiser Hayward, who has worked at the hospital since 1970. "It increases their level of comfort."

In one case, Knowles said, she mentored a 16-year veteran who was on the verge of quitting after making a medical error. The weekly conversations, on the phone and in person, helped rebuild the nurse's confidence in a constructive way.

"For a nurse who has made a medical error, if you don't have anybody you can talk to, it can be a difficult place to be," Knowles said.

Joann Mette, assistant administrator of patient care services at Kaiser Hayward, said the program is one of several strategies the hospital has employed to reduce turnover.

She said the hospital has retained 80 percent of 140 nurses hired in the past 18 months, an improvement over two years ago when the hospital employed 60 traveling nurses to fill vacancies.

Hospitals, which expect a rapidly escalating shortage of nurses between 2012 and 2030 as baby boomers retire, are recognizing the value of support systems in the workplace. Kaiser plans to expand the program to two other sites.

The first two years are a critical time for new nurses, who can easily become overwhelmed and quit. The foundation, an affiliate of the

California Nurses Association, emphasizes that its bedside nurses help each other, without the involvement of managers.

The foundation first sought to address the field's high turnover five years ago even as its sister union organization worked to set legal staff-to-patient ratios. The ratios, which went into effect in 2004 after a 12-year fight by the California Nurses Association, have also prompted hospitals to look to new ways to attract and retain nurses.

For instance, a 22-week clinical residency program provided by Versant Advantage Inc., a nonprofit offshoot of Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, is being used at over a dozen hospitals statewide, including John Muir Health. This program, which includes mentoring, also has improved retention of newer nurses.

The foundation's mentoring program, which started at two hospitals in 2003, is now also under way at Sequoia Hospital in Redwood City, O'Connor and Good Samaritan hospitals in San Jose, Mercy Hospital in Sacramento, St. Bernardine Medical Center in San Bernardino and San Gabriel Valley Medical Center in San Gabriel. The foundation also developed new guidelines for preceptorships, including that nurse trainers should have a reduced patient load.

These programs - funded for now through a \$904,000 grant from The California Endowment and a \$2.5 million grant from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation - are coming up for renewal. Several hospitals, including Good Samaritan and Kaiser-Hayward, are looking to continue.

The foundation's program is distinguished by its duration: two years. Most hospitals offer new nurses preceptorships that last between six and 10 weeks. Some hospitals seek to lengthen these preceptorships and provide added support. When John Muir Health adopted the Versant program in 2005, it went from eight weeks to five months of support for new nurses. Mentorships extend if participants wish.

ValleyCare Medical Center in Pleasanton runs a six-month program that includes pairing nurses with more experienced "buddy" nurses.