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New policies target statewide nursing shortage

By Andrew Oxford

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Samantha Tafoya and Jessica Valerio were born and raised in Taos. A series of new policies touted this month by Gov. Susana Martinez aim to keep them here.

The two nursing students plan on graduating from UNM-Taos in the spring with associate degrees in nursing amidst a shortage of health care professionals.

To stanch the particularly swift flow of qualified practitioners from rural communities, policy makers have proposed allowing students such as Tafoya and Valerio to pursue bachelor's degrees at community colleges and college administrators have announced plans to implement a common curriculum for nursing education.

"We would both like to stay here," Valerio said.

Noting not only the family that root them to Northern New Mexico, Tafoya said coursework at Holy Cross Hospital had helped them develop a familiarity with the local health care community.

"Having our clinical time at the hospital, we feel comfortable there," she explained.

But a harsh job market and the absence of opportunities to pursue advanced degrees drive many students such as Tafoya and Valerio out of areas suffering from shortages of health care professionals.

The series of initiatives announced by the governor's office this month also include a proposal to streamline the licensing process for nurses relocating to New Mexico from other states, increase the number of grants awarded to students who practice in rural areas after graduation and change the certification process for nursing educators.

"What I am most excited about is the statewide nursing curriculum," said Melissa Ellen Offenhartz, nursing program director at UNM-Taos.

Under the common curriculum that policy makers and educators have been crafting since 2011, credits from nursing programs would transfer seamlessly between colleges and universities within New Mexico.

On Nov. 8, the governor and officials from New Mexico Nursing Education Consortium announced the curriculum will be adopted by every school in the state offering nursing programs.

The move would also allow more nursing students to pursue bachelor's degrees at community college campuses.

"It will allow students to obtain their bachelors of science in nursing while residing in the community and — hopefully — retaining those nurses in the community," Offenhardt said.

The UNM-Taos nursing program hopes to implement the common curriculum by fall 2016, she added.

"It changes all the courses in our curriculum," the director said, noting that the curriculum has been approved by a faculty committee and is now awaiting approval from administrators at UNM in Albuquerque, the state Board of Nursing and the organizations that accredit the school.

Offenhardt also praised a plan to expand financial assistance for nursing educators pursuing additional certification to include any nurse in the state interested in earning advanced degrees and teaching other health care professionals.

"One of the problems in nursing education is a lack of faculty," she said, noting that instructors are required to possess a masters degree.

The Nursing Loan-for-Service program would extend state assistance to nurses interested in pursuing a master's degree with policy makers hoping they will then be enticed to work as instructors.

Other policies, such as a plan to streamline the process by which nurses can transfer their credentials to New Mexico, raise the question of who will hire the health care professionals needed in shortage areas.

Job growth in the health care sector has slowed on a longterm upward trend, according to data published Nov. 8 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Nationwide, an average of 17,000 jobs have been added in the health care sector each month this year compared to 27,000 jobs each month in 2012.

The expansion of Medicaid and the expectation that broader access to health insurance will increase demand for health professionals are driving the new policies, albeit ahead of the curve, according to the governor's deputy chief of staff Scott Darnell.

"We have gone to work in the months since deciding to expand Medicaid to grow our health care workforce and meet that demand head-on," he said.

The policies announced this month will require time to implement, Offenhardt cautioned.

"None of this going to happen overnight," she said.

Tafoya, Valerio, other students of hers and the entire community could benefit, she added, if recent moves make rural New Mexico an easier place for nurses to practice.