



News Release



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NMCC and HRH Partner to Provide Nursing Education in Southern Aroostook

Aroostook County - As the population of the community and state ages, demands on local healthcare systems are also on the rise. At the same time, many area nurses are in that rising age group and are looking toward retirement in the near future...which has led many to wonder, "Who will take care of us?"

As part of its continuing efforts to meet local nursing demands, Northern Maine Community College (NMCC) has taken advantage of distance technology and partnered with Houlton Regional Hospital (HRH) to educate a class of seven associate degree nursing students in Houlton. Similarly, the College is using this technology and health care facilities in the Calais/Machias area to educate and train up to 16 students in Washington County.

"It is a challenge for us to meet the growing needs of area health care providers, since we must limit our nursing class size to eight students per instructor—the maximum allowed by Maine's Rules and Regulations. This regulation addresses the need to ensure safety standards at clinical sites," explained Betty Kent-Conant, nursing and allied health department chair at the College. "We can only accommodate 32 to 40 students in a class at our Presque Isle campus. Both classroom size and the ability of central Aroostook health care providers to accommodate all of our students during our clinical site rotations limit our ability to add students at the Presque Isle campus. By utilizing distance education, not only can we add students to the program, but we can do so at locations closer to home, a benefit to students as well as local health care facilities in those areas, since they are able to participate in the training of, and perhaps have an advantage in the hiring of, potential future nurses for their facility."

As is often the case with students in the College's nursing program, several of the Houlton students are "non-traditional" and have families and/or jobs to balance with College work. "By training here, I not only save the cost of travel but have two hours more each day to spend with my family and to study," said Mark Goodale of Littleton, a nursing student enrolled in the Houlton program who is also working full-time in security at HRH. "I could not have taken this course if I had to travel to Presque Isle every day," echoed Jane Moody of New Limerick, who also has a family and other obligations.

Goodale, Moody, and five other southern Aroostook residents take courses at the Houlton Higher Education Center which are interactive over a web-com system with courses originating at the Presque Isle campus. An NMCC nursing instructor is on hand in the Houlton classroom to support and supplement nursing content and facilitate the local learning experience. In addition to her classroom work, instructor Deborah Folsom, RN, MSN, AHN-BC of Smyrna, also provides the clinical oversight of the students at Houlton Regional Hospital and other community sites which support meeting the clinical educational objectives of the program. Shelli Adams, a student from Oakfield, says Folsom "...is dedicated to nursing and is always available to help us, even if it means staying late."

The southern Aroostook students are in their first year of an extensive two-year nursing degree program. After successfully completing the program, they will earn their associate in science degree and be eligible to take the NCLEX-RN national licensure exam. Upon successful completion of the exam, they then are able to apply for licensure in Maine and/or any other state. As part of their educational experience, the students must train in a variety of clinical settings.

Most recently, the students completed a rotation on the labor, delivery and postpartum (LDRP) unit at HRH, which proved to be a positive experience for both the students and the LDRP nurses. On the first day on the unit, they were able to observe a C-Section, nurses caring for a baby with respiratory distress, and a mother who hemorrhaged after birth. Since the last two events are a rare occurrence, it was an ideal experience and opportunity for them.

"Even though I have worked in the E.D. here for a long time, I never realized all that could happen in obstetrics," said Adams, who also works 36 hours a week as ward clerk in the hospital's emergency department.

The students, under Folsom's direct supervision, assessed patients, participated in care planning, and performed basic nursing care. In addition to obstetrical patients and babies, the LDRP unit also often houses patients who have had other types of surgery, which allowed the students to also learn their specialized care.

"I appreciate the nurses here sharing their past experiences with us and am impressed that they work together so well," said Moody, who is enjoying her first experience with HRH.

"The experienced staff members here at the hospital are willing to share their expertise, and this enhances the students' learning," explained Folsom.

While some of the LDRP nurses were initially hesitant to have students who might be in the way, they found the training to be a positive experience. "The students were very helpful with anything asked of them and have an avid interest in learning new skills," said Linda Stewart, RNC,

one of the nurses in the unit. According to Stewart, having the students and instructor on the unit and hearing their discussions also acted as a refresher to staff.

Now that the students have completed their LDRP experience, they have moved on to a rotation on the medical/surgical/pediatrics unit at the hospital.

In addition to serving as a clinical site for the Houlton cohort of nursing students, HRH continues to collaborate with the College in other ways that ultimately benefit both institutions and help to provide needed training in the County.

Two of the hospitals LDRP nurses, Barbara Wright, RNC and Kathy Blanchette, RNC, recently traveled to NMCC's Presque Isle campus to teach at a nursing maternal/child seminar for the entire class. Wright taught assessment of fourth stage and postpartum, while Blanchette presented assessment and management of the breastfeeding mother.

Also, a senior nursing student, Jen McGuire of Houlton, has been performing a 60-hour preceptorship in the LDRP unit at night, with Gina Vargas, RN, serving as her preceptor. "It has also been a learning experience for me. Jen tracks all her experiences, keeping a log of what she has done. She has attended several deliveries, a C-Section, and helped with breastfeeding and IV insertion," said Vargas.

"We are very pleased to partner with Houlton Regional Hospital and the Houlton Higher Education Center to once again bring nursing education to the southern Aroostook community," said Timothy Crowley, NMCC president. "Our original pilot program for providing distance education in nursing was completed in Houlton just a few years ago, and, it is exciting to be able to bring our program back to that community. We never would have been able to do this, though, without additional state funding. That funding has allowed us to increase our capacity and to expand into southern Aroostook."

According to Crowley, the College is making the most of its resources to meet Aroostook County's growing needs in health care. "By partnering both with other colleges and with private businesses, we are stretching our resources as far as possible; however, the reality is that we are just meeting the tip of the ice berg in terms of need. The only way for us to deal with the shortages in health care, which will only continue to increase in coming years due to the aging population of today's healthcare professionals, is to increase our capacity," said Crowley.

With the appropriate funding, the College hopes to renovate a building on campus to house an Allied Health Center, which would provide space to expand the nursing program as well as to provide other allied health programs as needed in the region.



NMCC nursing students who are enrolled in the Houlton section of the program and are currently performing clinical rotations at Houlton Regional Hospital are, kneeling from left: Shelli Adams of Oakfield and Amy Savage of Patten; standing from left, Nicole Bennett and Alison Willette, both of Linneus; nursing instructor Deb Folsom; and Mark Goodale and Jillian Miller, both of Littleton.