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Individuals in the following groups seeking a nursing degree should consider themselves lucky: Professionals who work during the day, those who want to finish degrees quickly and nurses who cannot make day or night classes.

Six local nursing school programs — three of them new — are targeting niches such as these and making education more convenient than ever for associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees. The impetus is to rescue Nevada from its status as the next-to-worst state for nurses per population, a dishonor it received from the 2004 National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses.

Among the newest education programs in the Las Vegas Valley include the intensive 18-month track offered at the University of Southern Nevada, a new private institution. Touro University, also private and new, has tracks for nursing master's degrees for existing nurses and for those with bachelor's degrees that are not in nursing. University of Phoenix offers online bachelor's degrees for existing RNs.

Some of the state programs' latest features — and there are many — include an online-heavy master's track at UNLV, a part-time associate's program at CCSN and a 12-month plan for post-baccalaureate students at Nevada State College.

"It's not just a question of creating new slots," said Jane Nichols, vice chancellor for academic and student affairs for the Nevada System of Higher Education. "Institutions did some very creative things all the initiatives made a huge difference."

Growth has already been on an upswing since the Legislature told state colleges to double 2000-2001 enrollment figures in nursing programs.

More than 1,000 nursing students were in the valley's public institutions in the 2004 to 2005 school year, the most recent year for which numbers were available. Enrollment had grown by 42 percent in UNLV, CCSN and Nevada State College from the 2003-2004 year. (And by 197 percent since the 2000-2001 year, considering NSC started its program in the 2003-2004 school year.) "We are looking at a plan to again try to double nursing enrollment at the request of the legislative committee on health care," Nichols said. "The initiative to do this is not coming from institutions; it's coming from the community."

The strategy to increase school enrollment is endorsed by groups such as hospitals and

state departments, but it is not universally accepted. Service Employees International

Union Local 1107, the nurses' union currently in contract negotiations with hospitals, contends that the nursing shortage is a result of poor pay and conditions rather than qualified employees. Regardless of how it is explained, though, the nursing shortage is a nationwide trend, with other cities struggling to recruit, retain and establish pools of qualified teachers. Las Vegas nursing school leaders say they expect continued growth in their programs, regardless of how optimistic they are that the problem will ever be resolved.

Touro's programs, for example, are designed to create more qualified teachers because three-fourths of nursing instructors for bachelor's degrees in Nevada are required to have master's degrees in nursing.

But Sue Ullrich, director of nursing, sees the problem as insurmountable, even though she thinks the University of Nevada system is doing a fine job.



University of Southern Nevada nursing students Simon Do, left, and Mike Schaupp care for Edmund Kaja at the St. Rose Dominican Hospital-Rose de Lima Campus in Henderson on Monday. The nursing school has 31 students in its first nursing class and expects another 80 for its next class, which begins in August.

-Photo by Steve Marcus

"Even with the mandate to double, (the state) still can't meet the needs for nurses," she said. "We still can't do it; it's an impossibility in my mind."

Mabel Smith, dean of the USN College of Nursing, is reaching across the country to recruit students. The university is placing an advertisement in the Houston Chronicle, for example.

Smith predicted that, outside of efforts in the Las Vegas area, overall industry trends may prove helpful in enrollment goals. "There are now record applicants for nursing programs," she said. "The nursing profession itself has made tremendous gains. The salaries are higher, the career options for nurses are so varied. You can do three 12-hour shifts and be done for the week." Cristina Rodriguez covers medical and workplace issues for In Business Las Vegas and its sister publication, the Las Vegas Sun. She can be reached at (702) 259-2326 or by e-mail at cristina.rodriguez@lasvegassun.com.