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Health Care Groups Point to Workforce 'Crisis'

By Jim Saunders
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TALLAHASSEE --- A broad coalition of health-care groups Monday tried to ratchet up attention on staffing and financial problems, saying the state needs to take steps to help address what industry officials describe as a “crisis.”

“The labor shortage is the worst it’s ever been,” said Emmett Reed, CEO of the Florida Health Care Association, the largest nursing-home group in the state.

A coalition that includes leaders of groups representing nursing homes, hospitals, assisted-living facilities and home-health providers met with reporters and detailed issues such as shortages of nurses and certified nursing assistants and a lack of nursing faculty and student slots at colleges and universities.

They said the COVID-19 pandemic worsened staffing problems, causing workers to get burned out and raising costs.

“The pandemic has been like a gasoline can over that fire,” said Mary Mayhew, president and CEO of the Florida Hospital Association.

The press event came a little more than two months before the start of the 2022 legislative session and weeks before Gov. Ron DeSantis proposes a budget for next fiscal year. While each part of the health-care industry will have different requests and priorities, at least part of the attention will focus on Medicaid funding.

The Joint Legislative Budget Commission, a panel of House and Senate members that can make mid-year budget decisions, will consider a proposal Thursday to provide a \$99.5 million infusion of Medicaid money to nursing homes over a three-month period. Reed called that a “life preserver to keep us afloat.”

But it was not clear Monday how much money the different parts of the industry will seek from the Legislature during the 2022 session, which will start in January.

Employers in various parts of the economy have complained for months about not being able to find enough workers as the pandemic has continued. But representatives of the health-care groups said worker shortages can affect access to care for patients and force providers to bring in temporary help from staffing agencies --- which drives up expenses.

“Right now, what we are doing is we are all competing for a really small pool and actually a slightly shrinking pool of nurses,” said Justin Senior, CEO of the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida, which represents public, children’s and teaching hospitals. “A lot of retirements have been pulled forward. We have got to replace what we have lost, and then grow it even more for our growing population.”

The problems go beyond nurses, however, the health-care officials said.

Bobby Lolley, executive director of the Home Care Association of Florida, pointed to a “revolving door” of certified nursing assistants, who provide large amounts of hands-on care. Lolley suggested the state should consider paying training costs of certified nursing assistants as a way to bolster the workforce.

Gail Matillo, president and CEO of the Florida Senior Living Association, which represents assisted-living facilities, said many staff members are switching employers and leaving the industry.

“Our staff has said enough is enough, and they have just decided to get out of the business altogether,” Matillo said.