BANGOR DAILY NEWS

UMaine wins grant to train nurses as primary care providers in underserved areas

By Cameron Paquette, Special to the BDN
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ORONO, Maine — Kelly McCoubrey loves her family, her job and her state. The 52-year-old Meddybemps resident has lived just a stone’s throw from Canada in Washington County all her life.

McCoubrey works as a registred nurse at Downeast Community Hospital in Machias, a profession that she dreamed of as a little girl when her grandmother worked as a public health nurse for the Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

After spending 15 years as an RN, McCoubrey will enroll in the Family Nurse Practitioner Master’s Program at the University of Maine in Orono so she can become a primary health care provider, which are few and far between in the Downeast region. As nurse practitioners, McCoubrey and other graduates of the program will be able to diagnose patients, prescribe medication and order lab tests, functions an RN isn’t licensed to perform.

“I was born and raised in Washington County,” she said. “So were my parents, so were my children. It’s not going to change,” McCoubrey said.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has awarded a $600,000 grant to students pursuing a master’s degree through UMaine’s Family Nurse Practitioner Program. The funds will effectively cover tuition for four full semesters per student, which roughly equates to about $6,000 for the 20 students in the FNP program.

“The goal of the funding is they want more care providers in underserved areas as soon as possible,” said Nancy Fishwick, director of the School of Nursing at UMaine.

According to the U.S. DHHS, an area may be considered medically underserved if it has too few primary care providers, high infant mortality, high poverty, and/or a large elderly population. Fishwick said most counties north of central Maine fit the definition.

Every two years, the U.S. DHHS Health Resources and Services Administration puts out a call for funding applications for the Advanced Education Nursing Traineeship Program. The most recent call for proposals came out in mid-December 2013 with a Jan. 16, 2014 deadline. Only 60 programs can be funded, which stimulates a high level of competition among institutions.

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According to Fishwick, an increase in grant money awarded by U.S. DHHS for this round has been coupled with a more stringent application process, which has in turn led to even more competition for the money.

“We’ve had this funding in the past but never this generous an amount,” Fishwick said. “I’ll apply again but I can’t predict our success. We’ve got a good track record ... but I can’t predict how stiff the competition will be.”

Fishwick and her faculty hope to continue to provide nursing students with the means to enter the healthcare field at a low personal cost.

Before she found out about the grant, McCoubrey was considering completing the program part-time, which would have taken at least another year to complete. One more year of paying for school while making little to no money.

“I’m 52,” McCoubrey said. “For me to take an extra year to [complete the program], I would never recoup. The amount of work [faculty] put in to get this grant for students is great. The teachers put in a lot of work for the students.”

McCoubrey is anxious about going back to school, but feels that once she gets into the program her nerves will dissipate.

“I remember being nervous for clinicals. After you do it for a few years, you can do it with your eyes closed,” she said.

According to McCoubrey, the number of health care practitioners in the Downeast region is subpar. As a member of the National Nurses United union, McCoubrey said she does her best to help people and quell medical concerns. However, with primary care providers declining and the general low number of providers in the region, McCoubrey felt she needed to do more.

“I live in Washington County and hospitals are struggling to stay afloat. I thought I should probably [become a practitioner] now if I’m gonna do it,” McCoubrey said.

She hopes to finish the program within two years and become a family practitioner before branching off into a more specific field, such as orthopedics or geriatrics. Regardless of what she ends up doing, McCoubrey insists upon staying Downeast.