

## Hospital concierges care for caregivers

With nursing shortages and harried staff, area hospitals have a potent recruiting tool in a new kind of nurse's aide.

By Marsha Austin  
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Hospital nursing pays better than ever, but it still means up to 12 hours on tired feet, grabbing meals from cafeteria trays between patients and - if it's a night shift - going home exhausted when the rest of the world is just waking up.

Post-office and dry-cleaning runs, oil changes and other errands can be nearly impossible without taking a day off.

So when one Denver hospital added a free personal concierge service for nurses and staff, it immediately became one of the facility's most powerful recruiting and retention tools.

In the midst of a nationwide nursing shortage and citywide hospital construction boom, that's no small feat.

"It's huge," said Marci Auerbach, a social worker and head of the case management department at Presbyterian/St. Luke's Medical Center in central Denver. "It's the best benefit I've ever gotten next to health insurance."

Four years ago, Presbyterian/St. Luke's had more than 100 unfilled nursing positions. Today, six months after initiating the concierge program, the hospital has 35 openings.

"It's a lifesaver," said Sonja Classen, a nurse recruiter and daily user of the concierge. "I don't have to run to the post office and stand in line. They'll go buy (a gift), wrap it and ship it for you."

Colorado already is experiencing an 11 percent shortage of nurses. A steady drop in people entering the profession combined with the growing health-care needs of an aging population is fueling the shortage.

With that gap predicted to nearly triple to 30 percent by 2020, hospitals and other health-care employers are getting creative.

Besides pay, job candidates want to know about tuition reimbursement, training opportunities, flexible scheduling and other perks never considered a decade ago, Classen said.

A handful of Denver hospitals now offer concierge services.

"Environments that communicate the value of nurses and their professional capabilities ... are very valuable," said Sue Carparelli, chief executive of the Colorado Center for Nursing Excellence. "When that's absent, you'll see nurses gravitating elsewhere."

Presbyterian/St. Luke's is the first health-care client for Concierge Colorado, a Denver company founded by valet-parking mogul Todd Wheeler.

The company, with nurse input, created a hospital service staffed by two concierges who run errands such as grocery shopping and getting bike tuneups.



Sonja Classen, right, a nurse recruiter at Presbyterian/St. Luke's Medical Center, picks up cleaning from concierge Courtney Kendall. The service handles a multitude of tasks, making nurses lives easier. (Post / Kathryn Scott Osler)

"It's about adjusting to the client's needs," said marketing director Courtney Kendall.

A hospital concierge's typical day consists of taking two or three cars for oil changes and washes, a trip to the grocery store and a trip or two to the mall for a gift certificate or to return a purchase, she said.

The goal is to have all of a nurse's errands finished by the time his or her shift ends.

The hospital says the investment is paying off in reduced sick and personal days and better-focused, less-stressed employees.

"People are now able to be at home with their kids," said Steve Le Moine, the hospital's director of community development/outreach.

More than 3,000 staffers, mostly nurses, used the concierge service in April. The five most popular services were shopping, automotive repairs, mailing, research and picking up items. The concierges also have helped nurses find day-care centers, ordered limousines, planned marriage proposals, fed pets, made vacation reservations and obtained tickets to sold-out concerts.

"We are very adamant about helping our employees balance work with life," Le Moine said.

Auerbach, a single mother, said she no longer has to spend hours running errands after picking up her 11-year-old son from school. And her Saturdays are free, too.

She has used the concierge to get new tires put on her car, grocery-shop, handle dry-cleaning and bakery orders, and help find a hotel in Las Vegas.

"I've got such job satisfaction. I don't want to ever leave," Auerbach said. "People don't think about how stressful the work environment is that we work in and how stressful our lives are."

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