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Working in Underserved Communities Offers Nurses Invaluable Skills

by [Linda Childers](#) | Jul 19, 2016 | [Community, News, Nursing Articles](#) | [0 Comments](#)



A critical portion of what Vathany Chea learned in the nursing program at Fresno State University in Fresno, California, didn't occur in the classroom, but rather in the School of Nursing's Mobile Health Unit that provides free health screenings.

The free mobile health clinic travels to rural communities in the Central Valley providing care to those who need it most. Many of the residents seen by nursing students are uninsured or underinsured, and face language and transportation barriers when trying to access health care. The mobile unit staff provides free education and screenings for blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, heart and lung health, and more. They treat underserved patients who cannot afford care or who don't have convenient access because of transportation challenges.

In caring for the underserved, nurses work in communities where many residents are below the poverty level, have a significant amount of chronic health problems and medical disabilities, reside in geographic isolated areas, and don't have a sufficient number of health care providers to meet the demands for service.

For nursing students such as Chea, the experience of working with rural health patients offers a different perspective than working in a medical clinic or hospital. As part of the mobile health clinic, working with vulnerable medical populations helps to broaden the students' experiences; assists them in developing a better understanding of the barriers to care the population faces; and gives them a better understanding of other ethnicities, cultures, and their unique practices and beliefs.

Chea says nursing students who work in the mobile health unit treat many patients who have chronic health problems such as diabetes, and that it's been enlightening to learn some of the challenges rural patients face in managing their chronic condition.

"When we talk to our diabetic patients about eating healthier foods, many tell us they are limited with what they can eat because of affordability," Chea says. "A diabetic homeless person once told me the shelter where she goes to eat offers a lot of sweets because that is what is donated to the facility."

When faced with such dilemmas, Chea says nursing students learn to embrace challenges and to think on their feet offering solutions such as easy food alternatives that don't require cooking, and teaching patients portion control and how to make better food choices whenever possible.

"We hope that providing access to patients and families who can't get preventative care will improve health outcomes," Chea says. "Many of the patients we treat don't realize they have a chronic condition such as diabetes or high blood pressure, and by diagnosing them and starting them on the road to treatment, our goal is to help them to avoid health complications in the future."

Many Programs Offer Loan Reimbursement

In addition to gaining valuable nursing experience, and helping vulnerable patient populations, working in an underserved community can also offer nurses more tangible rewards. Many programs, such as NURSE Corps, allows nurses to receive reimbursement for 60% of their student loans if they agree to work for two years in one of their designated Health Professional Shortage Areas. Many states offer similar programs. For more information on student loan forgiveness programs, visit [here](#).

The experience of working in an underserved community is also attractive to potential employers. Holly Fenn, a nurse recruiter for Fusion Medical Staffing in Omaha, Nebraska, says nurses are in high demand in the travel industry right now, and that being fluent in other languages and having knowledge of different cultures are very desirable skills.

"We work with many health care facilities that have a high population of non-English speaking patients and being multilingual can be very helpful in explaining things to patients and putting them at ease," Fenn says. "There are many communities that have refugees from Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Turkey, and many others, so there is a need for nurses who can interact comfortably with patients who speak many languages and represent various cultures."

Medical Missions Always Seeking Nurse Volunteers

For nurses who are looking to expand their clinical knowledge, language skills, and cultural skills by working in an underserved community, medical missions offer a unique way to accomplish this.

Sue Averill, RN, co-founded the organization One Nurse at a Time to help nurses to enrich their lives and the lives of others around the world. She maintains a directory of organizations seeking volunteer nurses, and offers scholarships to offset the cost of medical missions.

"Serving on a medical mission makes nurses more well-rounded," says Averill. "We care for many patients who have never received formal medical care and may have walked for days to receive treatment."

Other organizations such as International Volunteer HQ and Maximo Nivel also offer nurses 1-2 week programs where they can volunteer in rural clinics throughout the world.

"Medical missions are a wonderful thing for nurses to be involved with," Fenn says. "The work they do is amazing, and not only does it offer additional experience to put on your resume, it also adds to your imprint on the world."



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