Nursing grads struggle to find jobs, despite projected shortages
BY Megan Miller
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Nursing is the largest healthcare occupation, adding more than a quarter million jobs last year alone, according to government figures. So why couldn’t Candice Dyer find a nursing job?

Dyer, a June 2011 graduate of Chamberlain College of Nursing in Chicago, and several of her classmates spent upwards of five months searching for their first jobs.

“I graduated back in June and took my boards back in August,” Dyer said. “From then until October, I filled out over a hundred online applications.”

Dyer, 30, continued working as a massage therapist while filing dozens of applications each week.

“I didn’t get any calls back,” she said. And next-day emails? Those were only sent to inform her that the institutions were not hiring new grads.

The job search was draining, but Dyer continued to network and her persistence paid off in October.

“I got my first interview, and my only interview, because the person I gave a massage to used to work in H.R. at the hospital,” she said.

Dyer said she considered herself lucky that the interview led to a job in her first choice of specialties as an emergency room nurse at West Suburban Medical Center in Oak Park.

“I was hoping to get any job and any experience,” said Dyer. “That was all I could hope for.”

The sour economy has upended projections for a U.S. nursing shortage. Baby-boomer nurses who had been expected to start retiring in large numbers are clinging to their jobs, so new grads can’t get in the door.

“They’re kind of clogging some of those vacancies right when a lot of those new R.N.s are entering the workforce,” said David Auerbach, a health economist at RAND Health, nonprofit health research arm of the RAND Corp.

Meanwhile he says, the trends show that new nursing grads in their mid-20s are the largest cohort to enter the field in several decades.

“This is an indicator of a new generation of people that is very energetic about nursing,” Auerbach said.

The log-jam is primarily confined to metropolitan areas.

Students like Dyer are fortunate to find jobs in hospital settings within the city, said Dr. Ann Solari-Twadell, director of the accelerated bachelor of science in nursing program at Loyola University. Chicago and other big cities are home to elite hospitals, the places new nursing grads aspire to. These hospitals often offer one-on-one mentors, higher pay and other perks that new nurses won’t find elsewhere.
While there is a demand for nurses in many rural and suburban settings, the jobs are often outside hospital settings, making it harder to develop expertise in a specialty.

“They’re not too excited about going to places where that professional development isn’t exactly on the front burner,” Solari-Twadell said.

The nature of nursing is changing, shifting away from hospital-based primacy. Nursing programs are evolving to meet the need and to give students a realistic view of their profession’s future.

“We know that in the future we really are going to shift care to care in the home, care in the community, care in the clinics,” said Mary Chesney, director of the doctorate nursing practice program at the University of Minnesota said. “We’re trying to prepare students for that.”

Positions like Dyer’s, she said, will become fewer as the need moves to a new identity of healthcare with an aging population.

“We are trying to help our new graduates envision a world that looks different in the world where care is delivered today,” she said.