Nursing schools seek to improve training on veteran care
By Kate Thayer
July 4, 2012

With nurses often at the front lines of medical care, there's a movement in the Chicago area and across the country to ensure that nursing students are better trained to tend to a new generation of patients who are military veterans.

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, the National League of Nursing, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing and other industry groups are calling on nursing schools to take a pledge to do more to educate students on handling veterans and their families. The pledge is part of Joining Forces — a campaign championed by first lady Michelle Obama and Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, to support veterans. Hundreds of nursing schools have already signed on, according to nursing groups.

"It's the right thing to do," said Beverly Malone, CEO of the National League of Nursing. Soldiers "are taking care of us in so many ways. We need to take care of them."

The pledge encourages enhanced training for maladies commonly seen in veterans, including post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries. And the need for veteran-specific care is likely to grow given the impending troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, scheduled for 2014, Malone said.

How area nursing schools are carrying out the pledge varies, and some administrators say they already have strong programs in place.

At Elgin Community College, officials are re-examining how the school teaches topics such as recognizing warning signs of depression or suicide and identifying a traumatic brain injury, said Linda Hartley, nursing program director.

While such content is already covered in some classes, there is now more of a focus on treating those conditions in veterans specifically, as well as on making sure nursing students are aware of the resources available to servicemen and servicewomen and their families.

"As you develop that nurse-patient relationship, patients do talk to you," Hartley said. "You do look for any issues they might be having."

Often veterans don't seek out mental health resources or other help they might need, which is why it's important those in health care know what to look for, said Patrick McGrath, director of the Center for Anxiety and Obsessive Compulsive Disorders at Alexian Brothers Medical Center in Elk Grove Village. McGrath also works at the hospital's Vet Center, which is touted to be the nation's only veteran-focused hospital center, outside of Veterans Affairs hospitals.

"There are more people dying now of suicide than we have in war," he said. "It's a huge problem right now. It is imperative any doctor or nurse seeing a veteran do a suicide assessment."
Some nursing schools have already recognized a greater need for veteran training and expanded their efforts.

Margaret Kraft, assistant professor at Loyola University Chicago's school of nursing, said the opportunities for students to work with patients at Hines VA Hospital in Maywood have grown substantially in the past three years. Because of the VA's proximity to Loyola University Medical Center, the nursing school has a strong relationship with the VA, Kraft said, and some members of the VA's advanced practice nursing staff also teach at the nursing school.

Loyola also plans to expand its nursing student training at the VA's simulation laboratory, where mannequins stand in for real patients.

Schools are using the pledge as an opportunity to step up efforts in the community.

Graduate and undergraduate nursing students at Rush University's College of Nursing will issue health screenings at this summer's Valor Games Midwest, a sports competition for disabled veterans at Soldier Field.

Gerry Gorman, assistant professor at University of Illinois at Chicago's College of Nursing, also pointed out the importance of meeting the needs of nursing students who are veterans themselves.

Often, veterans entering school upon their return from service choose nursing as a career, Gorman said.

"I think it appeals to that sense of service they already have," she said.

Gorman is developing tools to assist nursing students who are veterans. A new effort starting this fall is an elective workshop that uses art therapy to relieve stress, she said.

Malone said efforts sparked by the Joining Forces pledge will not only benefit the veterans but promote compassion.

"These are our men and women who have represented us everywhere abroad," she said. "It's a healing initiative, not just for veterans and their families but for all of us."