

FLORIDA'S HEALTH CARE SYSTEM COULD LOSE NEARLY HALF OF ITS NURSES

October 8, 2019



Owners of small nursing schools met for a forum on Sept. 28. Attending were Florida Reps. Nicholas Duran and Ana Maria Rodriguez.

SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

In 2018, 45% of all nurses who became licensed in Florida graduated from career schools, according to data provided by the Florida Center for Nursing.

Yet most of these schools are being shut down by the Florida Board of Nursing due to a controversial law that brought owners of small nursing schools together for a forum on Sept. 28.

In attendance were Florida Reps. Nicholas Duran (D, District 112) and Ana Maria Rodriguez (R, District 105), who both sit on the health care committees that consider laws involving nursing practice in Florida.

The Floridians most likely to be excluded from nursing careers are low-income Floridians who seek a second chance in life by enrolling in career schools.

Carolyn Sutton, proprietor of Ruby's Academy of Health Occupations in Lauderhill, explained that "the average applicant at our school has an annual income of less than \$12,000 a year."

Sutton's student population is similar to that of most career schools. The applicants are nontraditional college students, often from the lower ranks of their high school graduating classes. Some have only a GED.

Almost none would qualify for admission at most public nursing schools in Florida. Yet they are capable of learning the material and getting jobs with starting pay that averages over \$50,000, according to [ziprecruiter.com](https://www.ziprecruiter.com).

30 PROGRAMS SHUT DOWN

On Aug. 7, the Board of Nursing shut down 30 nursing programs including some with job placement rates of 80% or higher. The terminations were based on a provision in the Florida Nurse Practice Act that terminates registered nurses (RN) programs if they fail to become accredited within five years. No exceptions.

Among the terminated programs was Orlando-based Gwinnett Institute's RN program. Campus President William Atkinson objected to the termination because he said Gwinnett placed 79 of 96 graduates in nursing jobs in Florida last year. That's 82% when the placement rate required by most accreditors is 70% to 80%.

Atkinson told the board, "We're doing our job," but the board voted to close the program anyway, blaming the Legislature.

MULTI-STEP PROGRAM

Attorney Shavon Jones of RegulatorGuards, a company that represents small businesses in disputes with the government, hosted the forum. Jones points out that while the statute provides only five years to obtain nursing accreditation, the accreditation process actually takes six to seven years to complete.

This is because nursing accreditation is a multi-step process.

First, a school must have two years of operating history. Only then can they school apply for general accreditation called “institutional accreditation,” which takes 18 to 24 months, followed by nursing accreditation which takes an additional two to three years to complete.

That explains the controversy – the reason that so many programs are being shut down is because the law did not provide enough time to begin with.

Plus, many of the programs did not have even the full five years that the statute provides, because shortly after they finished Step 2 (institutional accreditation) their institutional accreditor was shut down by the federal government only to be reinstated two years later when the U.S. president changed.

“These schools are like a political football,” said Jones.

LAW ‘TOO BROAD’

The school owners believe that the Florida legislature is not fully aware of the accreditation process or the impact of this law.

“The Legislature was intending to eliminate bad schools that are not getting their graduates licensed. But the law they passed is too broad and is eliminating good programs that are needed to provide adequate educational opportunities to Florida residents who want to become nurses,” said Jones.

Representatives Duran and Rodriguez came prepared, having researched the issue. They listened attentively and provided information and guidance on how the program owners can seek relief in the next legislative session, which begins Jan. 14, 2020.

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