

EDITORIAL

Quality health care gets a booster shot from St. David's

EDITORIAL BOARD

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According to federal estimates, Texas will need 138,000 new nurses over the next seven to 10 years.

Yet, Texas nursing schools turned away 4,200 qualified applicants in the 2003-04 school year for lack of faculty, according to Code Red, a recent study by the Task Force on Access to Health Care in Texas. Another finding: There are more than 8,000 vacant nursing positions in Texas hospitals, and by 2010, there will be a shortage statewide of more than 52,000 nurses.

And with its rapidly growing population, Central Texas is no exception to the nursing shortage.

So the decision by the St. David's Community Health Foundation to donate \$6 million to Texas State University-San Marcos for a nursing school program at the university's Round Rock Higher Education Center is a major contribution to the future of this community.

Anyone who has to stay in a hospital quickly learns (or is reminded) that the quality of care depends most on the nurses on duty around the clock, not the doctor who might occasionally come by. Whether it's a need for more pain medicine or help with a bedpan, it's the nurse who will respond first.

How quickly and how competently that nurse responds depends directly on staffing and training. If there are enough well-trained nurses on hand, patients will get the help they need quickly.

But even highly trained nurses can't be in two — or three, or four — patient rooms at once. Texas doesn't have enough nurses now, and the need is growing, not diminishing.

The \$6 million from the St. David's Foundation will cover most of the \$8 million needed for faculty, lab equipment and other costs to start the nursing program. The plan is to admit the first 100 nursing students in 2010.

Texas State is seeking an additional \$40 million from the state for construction of the nursing school building, and state Rep. Mike Krusee, R-Williamson County, has said he will push for funding when lawmakers convene in January.

The need for more nurses is critical. The Code Red study said that research shows that the chance of dying during a hospital stay "is significantly reduced when hospital nursing staff has higher levels of nursing education and training."

By contributing \$6 million to nursing education, the St. David's Community Health Foundation has made not only a practical investment to train nurses who might someday work in the St. David's hospital system.

The foundation also has made a major contribution to the quality of life — life itself, on occasion — of Central Texans, and it deserves our thanks.