

More job applicants are seeking the stability of medical careers.

# A healthy field

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Donna Ferguson spent about a decade working in information technology before being laid off.

Now the Salem resident is looking to the health care industry for future paychecks.

Bill Potter said given the current economy he's grateful to have a job as a nurse after spending 15 years as an engineering design draftsman and several more years in a coffee shop.

And Brooke Crouch said after she graduates in May, she's counting on the needs for dental hygienists to help her secure a job during this recession.

With health care standing out as one of the few industries where jobs are being added instead of shed during the economic crisis, Ferguson, Potter and Crouch aren't the only people looking to tap into the security of health professions. Colleges in the Roanoke and New River valleys report an increase in applicants to their various programs in the health field, and some say they have noticed a surge in the number of inquiries from non-traditional students — those not right out of high school — looking to head back to school.

While many of the programs point to multiple reasons for the uptick in students interested in the medical field, they all agree the recession has been a contributing factor. Job seekers looking for more control in an unstable

consider advanced training and graduate school to add an even greater sense of job protection.

"In every recession there are always people who come back to school or grad school to advance their skills," said Raymond Linville, dean of Radford University's Waldron College of Health and Human Services.

In particular, Linville said the college has seen tremendous interest in its new physical therapy and occupational therapy graduate programs. While the occupational therapy program is set to begin classes in the fall, the physical therapy program is on hold until a chair for the program is hired.

## A growing industry

Nationwide, health care will generate 3 million new jobs between 2006 and 2016. That's more than any other industry, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Seven of the 20 fastest-growing occupations are in health care.

Projected rates of employment growth range from 13 percent in hospitals, the largest and slowest growing industry segment, to 55 percent in the much smaller home health care services.

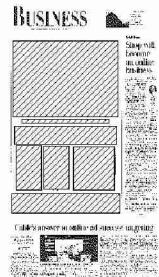
As talks heat up for national health care reform, the industry could be further affected as providers figure out ways to accommodate the millions of people who are now uninsured and likely not accessing health care services.

"If you get those people back on insurance and they are getting health care again, then you are going to increase the demand issues," said Beverly Beck, director of Virginia's Healthcare Workforce Data Center. "No matter what, it will make an impact."

Beck is working with a team of experts to establish work force data to help spot trends and inform the public and policymakers about the supply and demand of health care workers. The center was funded by the state in July.

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economy have led some people who are already working in the medical field to



"We really don't have anything like that now," she said.

While the economic crisis has not entirely spared the health care industry, it is among the few sectors that has added jobs.

In Virginia, health care jobs grew in several areas from January 2008 to January 2009, according to numbers released last month by the Virginia Employment Commission. That includes a 7.9 percent uptick in private social assistance, a 2.4 percent increase at hospitals and 3.1 percent growth at nursing and resident homes.

Locally, for instance, Carilion Clinic's ongoing transformation from a hospital-based provider to a clinic-based health care system has helped sustain job growth. The Roanoke Valley's largest employer, Carilion now employs about 12,000 people. Carilion competitor HCA Southwest Virginia also has continued to hire for clinical jobs at its four hospitals throughout the economic downturn.

It's the growth in the health care field that has Ferguson looking to make a move into the industry.

Ferguson was laid off Jan. 9, and has had no luck in finding employment in the IT industry.

"I don't have a bachelor's, so it is much harder for me to get my foot in the door," she said.

Two weeks ago she finished a Virginia Western Community College online course called introduction to medical technology. It cost \$89 and helped her decide to make a career change.

"The medical field is always booming, so I decided that is the direction I want to go in," she said.

Last week she enrolled in an online certification program through the American Academy of Professional Coders.

Once certified, Ferguson plans to run her own business offering to work for physician offices to help code patient medical information for insurance purposes. She has already set up a business, F&H Administrative Services, and begun networking for clients.

With a daughter, a husband, three dogs and a "huge mortgage," Ferguson said the decision to spend \$1,300 for the certification courses was something that had to happen to improve her family's financial future.

"I have to be working, and I have to be bringing in some income," she said.

## Early enrollment numbers

It's people in similar positions who are helping to boost early application numbers at some area colleges. Both Virginia Western and Jefferson College of Health Sciences have seen a rise in applications for some health programs. Numbers from Radford were not yet available, Linville said.

Still, it's too early to know the extent of the impact the recession has had on the health field. And National College in Salem hasn't seen a dramatic increase in people looking to change careers by getting trained for a job in health care, spokesman Chuck Steenburgh said.

"From our perspective the big move to health professions took place in the '90s," Steenburgh said. "We're to the point now [where] we've gone from a small percentage of the student body up to 50 percent today who are in the health care field. There may be a modest increase, but it really hasn't been anything dramatic."

Still since January, Virginia Western in Roanoke saw a significant increase in applicants to its health technologies division, especially in nursing, where applications were up 16 percent.

"We may see a much bigger increase next year because of those people in the pipeline who have not yet applied to a program," said Anne Kornegay, dean of the health technologies division.

Many people deciding to make a career switch may not have the prerequisites needed and could be obtaining those before enrolling in a specific degree program, she said.

Similarly, Jefferson College has also seen an increase in its applications compared with a year ago. Jefferson College, which has rolling admissions, has received 1,623 applications, up 7.3 percent from 1,512 the same time a year ago. The college's nursing program has seen applications increase 24 percent.

Not only is the college seeing more applications, but more applicants who have committed to attending by putting down deposits. Of the 1,623 applicants, 240 students have made a deposit, up from 189 a year ago.

"Absolutely, the economy has had an impact," said Carolyn Melby, chairwoman of nursing for Jefferson College. "We just have a lot more interest being expressed, and we have serious applicants who are making calls to find out what we have to

offer. ... We've also had more inquiries from second degree people."

Potter is one of those "second degree" people.

Potter's decision to trade in his former job for a nursing career came before the economic meltdown and after earning a college degree in art. Discovering life as a draftsman didn't suit him, Potter headed to Roanoke College to study art and graphic design. While he finished his bachelor's degree in 2001, he never did go into graphic design. Instead, he ended up serving coffee.

It wasn't until 2004 when he turned to health care. Knowing Carilion Clinic would pay for employees to go to school, Potter ultimately landed a job as a front office person at a pediatric clinic. Six months after that, when he became eligible for Carilion's tuition waiver program, he started taking nursing classes at Jefferson College.

Potter finished his associate degree in nursing in May and passed his licensing exam in June. Since then he's been working in the geriatric unit at Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital.

Now, Potter is considering heading back to Jefferson College for a master's degree in nursing.

"Absolutely, the economy is a factor in that decision," Potter said. "I'm almost assured of always having a job. I will probably never want for a job. But I think that any time you have more education and experience in a field, you become more employable."

## Getting hired

Crouch, like Potter, is also counting on the luxury of being able to find a job in multiple markets should that be necessary. Although she doesn't want to move.

Crouch, 28, began classes at Virginia Western in 2006 to take the prerequisites needed to start the dental hygienist program in 2007. She will graduate May 15.

While Crouch has not found a job yet, she said she chose the field in hopes of bettering her employment prospects.

She admitted she is "a little concerned" about finding a job given the state of the economy, but said she thinks she is in a better position than before heading off to school.

Kornegay said many May graduates from the health technology division, which includes the nursing and dental hygienist programs, have jobs lined up and called the job prospects "very good."

Radford's Linville also said that he expects graduates to easily find jobs, especially once the two new programs in occupational therapy and physical therapy start graduating students.

That said, the recession has changed the projections slightly. In nursing, more nurses who were nearing retirement have delayed that decision. Additionally, older nurses and those who decided to take a break to raise children are heading back into the work force. This is creating an increased competition on open positions for new nursing graduates.

Kornegay said it may mean new nurses have to look at more options and not focus on top preferences.

"Some of those who wanted to be in the hospital setting may have to look at private practice openings, but there is still such a demand for nurses that I think it is a pretty secure world out there for people in health care," she said.

But Beck, director of the Healthcare Workforce Data Center, said, "The relief from the shortage is temporary. Do not get distracted. ...

"The real shortage is coming 10 to 15 years down the road when all the nurses retire," she said. "It is just like a tsunami effect, when you add in the aging of the population."

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**3 million**

Number of new jobs health care will generate nationally between 2006 and 2016

**55%**

Projected rate of employment growth in home health care services

**24%**

Increase in applications to Jefferson College's nursing program

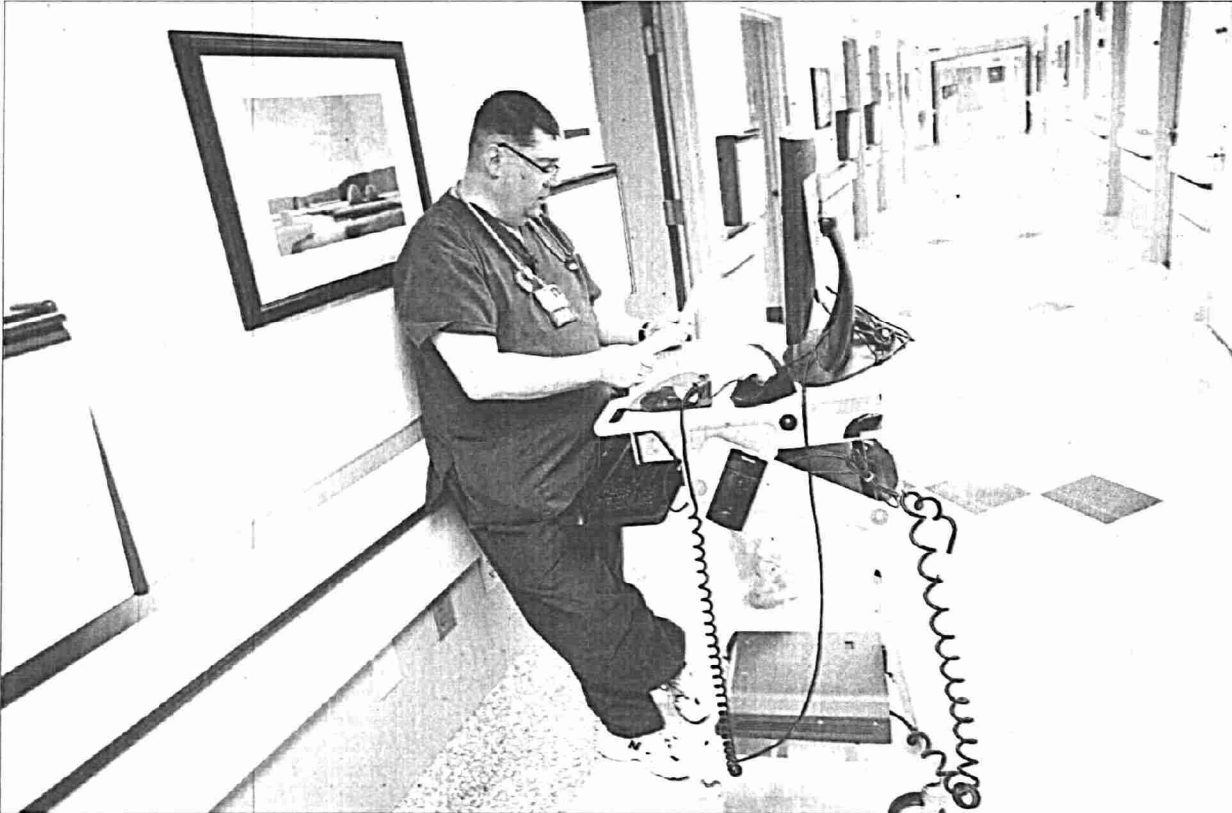
**16%**

Increase in applications to Virginia Western's nursing program

**13%**

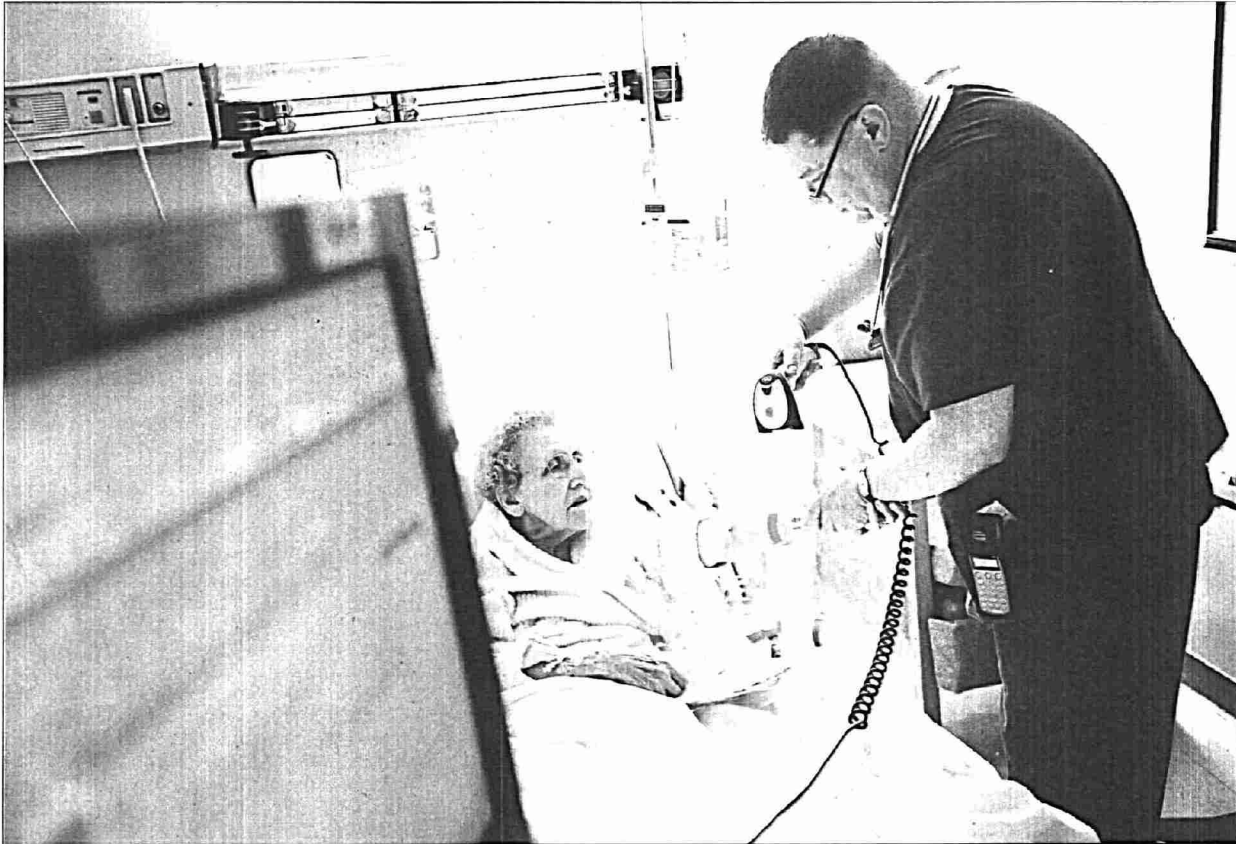
Projected rate of employment growth in hospitals

Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, Virginia Western Community College; and Jefferson College



KYLE GREEN | The Roanoke Times

Bill Potter, shown entering patient information, is considering heading back to Jefferson College for a master's degree in nursing.



Photos by KYLE GREEN | The Roanoke Times

Bill Potter, who works on the geriatric unit at Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital, scans a wristband on Virginia Smith. Potter decided a few years ago to switch careers after working as an engineering design draftsman and in a coffee shop.



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of always having a job.”*

**Bill Potter** of Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital