

Loan relief program an effort to relieve nursing shortage

By Rachel Mauro
Special to The Sentinel

As record low numbers of people are joining health care and education professions, the Maryland Higher Education Commission is finding new ways to motivate students to graduate as nurses and teachers. The Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program is giving out \$1.8 million for applicants who work and attended school at Maryland institutions.

A projection for the demand for these professions continues to dwarf the actual supply of available practitioners. According to a May 2007 report put out by the Maryland Department of Labor Licensing and Regulation, roughly half as many jobs in the professional nursing, mental health and physical therapist fields will be unfilled due to insufficient graduates in 2006.

The nursing faculty is in the biggest crisis with no recorded graduates last year. Of those jobs, 92 percent will be vacant.

All of these professions, as well as lawyers, occupational therapists, social workers, speech pathologists, physician assistants and a variety of teachers are eligible to apply for the loan assistance.

Though the application does not include a subjective opponent like an essay, specific criterion such as proof of residency and employment must be met.

“The fact is that approximately 20 to 25 percent applications that come in on any grants and scholarships will be ineligible one reason or other,” said MHEC Director of Communications Helen Szablya. “So getting your application in as soon as possible gives you the best chance.”

Szablya estimates an average of nine hundred applications will be submitted this year. However, as the amount of money allocated for the program increases, MHEC has decreased the number of applicants awarded funds. In 2006, 271 applicants were awarded money from \$2,200. In 2007, 561 were awarded from \$4,300.

Those eligible will be awarded on a first come, first serve basis and can receive up to \$10,000 a year to pay student loans, depending on financial need. Because nursing faculty is in higher demand, MHEC lists the cutoff income at \$75,000 annually if single and \$160,000 if married, compared to \$60,000 and \$130,000 respectively for other professions.

Beyond targeting health care and education workers today, MHEC has also sent this information to state colleges and universities for distribution to students, including Bowie State and Prince George's Community College. Both have studies in nursing, psychology and education.

The deadline for application is Sept. 30, 2007. More information is available on MHEC's Web site.