

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Panel warns of coming crisis in geriatric health care

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The United States must act quickly before a growing elderly population and a declining pool of nurses combine to bring a crisis in geriatric health care, a panel of experts has warned.

Father Michael D. Place, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, was among the 16 members of a panel on "The Future of the Health Care Labor Force in a Graying Society."

Convened by the Nursing Institute of the University of Illinois at Chicago and chaired by former U.S. Secretary of Labor Lynn Martin, the panel issued a report titled "Who Will Care for Each of Us? America's Coming Health Care Labor Crisis."

"America will face a health care crisis ... in 2010 — not enough nursing care providers to care for the people who need it most, our senior citizens," the May 9 report said.

"If ... America fails to build the required

infrastructure and does not take the bold and creative steps necessary to make these occupations attractive, ... nursing care for the elderly will be in the position of high need, low supply and high costs," it added.

Father Place said the members — representing public institutions, academia, think tanks, private businesses, organized labor and professional groups — shared a "common conviction that bold and creative steps are necessary to address the future of the nation's health care labor force."

"Elected officials, policy makers and health care executives and other private sector executives must take up the challenge to make nursing, especially geriatric nursing, a more attractive and desirable vocation," Father Place said.

"Our society must prepare itself for systemic changes; the solutions, when they come, will be neither simple nor quick.

Our health care labor force — and the aging population it will serve — deserve nothing less than for this nation to confront this critical issue and begin the challenging, yet necessary, national dialogue."

In its report, the panel recommended:

- Increasing wages and benefits "to more successfully recruit and retain nursing professionals."

- Management models that minimize administrative and bureaucratic responsibilities for nurses giving direct patient care.

- Establishing a federal commission led by the secretaries of Treasury, Labor and Health and Human Services "to investigate the possibilities and costs of publicly

funded economic incentives targeting people in geriatric nursing occupations."

- Appointing a national panel to examine education and training requirements for all nursing care occupations.

- Amending Medicare regulations to require geriatric training for entry-level nursing education and training programs.

The panel also called for collaboration between government agencies and private foundations to "identify the most successful recruitment and retention strategies for nursing care providers" and to study the economic consequences of informal caregiving, "including its impact on work and family life."

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