

## WE ARE MT. VERNON

## Register-News

## Health occupations program at MVTHS soars

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MT. VERNON — The Area Vocational Center Health Occupations Program at Mt. Vernon Township High School is growing by leaps and bounds thanks to a partnership with St. Mary's Good Samaritan Hospital in which the health provider worked with administrators to come up with a five-year health care initiative to answer projected needs in health care professions.

"The response from our students and the success of this initiative has been a bit overwhelming," AVC director Rob Knutson said. "We suspected that interest and growth would occur; however, I felt there would be more time. This is not the case. The fact is,

the plan between our partner and the program that was formulated to promote health care as a career choice appears to have worked. Many of our students have stepped up and appear to be willing to answer the call to the field."

The growth has prompted the MVTHS Board to hire another instructor for the program. The health occupations program was revamped three years ago, Knutson said. Changes in the program began after the hospital identified a current and future shortage in health care professionals.

"Right from the start, their leader-

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Mt. Vernon Township High School Area Vocational Center Health Occupations Program student Crystal Diaz gets instruction from one of the nurses at

St. Mary's Good Samaritan Hospital. The program has been growing steadily in the last three years, according to AVC director Rob Knutson.

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## HEALTH

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ship was able to provide longitudinal data outlining significant human resource deficits within the next 10 years," Knutson said. "This was impressive. Often Area Vocational Center leaders run into situations where [community] partners have waited until such a situation occurs and then seek someone to fix it for them.

"This was definitely not the case with Good Samaritan. I found a partner that, at present, has some immediate needs, but is most interested in projected deficits within 10 years, hospital-wide."

Knutson said during the discussions on changing the health occupations curriculum, it became apparent that St. Mary's Good Samaritan wasn't the only facility that would be experiencing shortages in the coming years. Three main challenges were identified for the shortages: The number of people interested in health care fields created by retiring baby boomers is not sufficient; the number of local students in regional training through Rend Lake College and the AVC was low, and the retention rate of those trained and certified in the community was low; and the local talent was moving away or driving to other communities to work.

Exposing youths to the many health care occupations was the first step, and Knutson said the hospital committed itself to holding a career day for all freshmen and participating in an interactive DVD showing local people in the workplace.

"The hospital voiced an interest in hiring a number of high school students part time in the morning that would be able to fill a number of positions in a variety of departments within the hospital," Knutson said. "At the time, the number of students at Mt. Vernon Area Vocational

Center able to fill jobs requiring a [certified nurse assistant] certification as a senior were few. Systematically, this occurred because students taking 'Health Care Aide' were being directed to take the 'Health Care Core Skills' course as a junior and 'Health Care Aide' as a senior. These students would then take their CNA exam during the summer after they graduated from high school. It became obvious that Mt. Vernon Area Vocational Center would have to make some systemic changes to fill this need."

Six strategies were implemented to give students more exposure to the workplace and expose them to the many health-related occupations. The first strategy was to provide a fast track for juniors with an interest and aptitude to be a registered nurse or licensed practical nurse.

"This will allow these students to complete course work needed to earn their CNA over the summer after their junior year," Knutson said. "As a senior, these students will now be available to take their knowledge, skills and certificate to secure a part-time job at a local hospital during the day. During this time, the student gains valuable hands-on experience, an income and three credits, while at the same time providing an opportunity for the employer to evaluate their ability and make a determination of whether or not this student will continue with the company."

Nursing is not the only health occupation and not the only area which is expected to see shortages. A strategy was also adopted to provide individualized career support to help students gravitate to those areas where their talents and interests in other areas could be used.

In addition, the curriculum was changed to allow time in the hospital setting.

"Over the years, for one reason or another, Mt. Vernon Area Vocational Center's health care aide rotations

became nursing home specific," Knutson explained. Knutson said there are many differences between the nursing home and hospital setting, and including the hospital setting helped retain students.

The plan also calls for the number of available slots in the health care occupations program to be increased, and the morning cooperative education class, which had previously been canceled, to be returned.

Some of the programs available to students in the health occupations program are dental assistant, dental laboratory aide, medical records technology/technician, medical assistant, pharmacy clerk, emergency medical technology/technician, respiratory therapy aide, radiology aide, surgical aide, central supply aide, nursing, ophthalmic services, rehabilitation/therapeutic services and medical laboratory aide/phlebotomist.

As part of its commitment as a partner, the hospital provided 12 staff members for seven hours every day to provide training to students and four days of exposure for career days and career education courses; donated six hospital beds at an estimated value of \$24,000; allows students access to facilities and personnel daily; and cooperative training to at least four or five students. Knutson estimated the hospital invests just over \$50,000 a year to the AVC program.

Other community partners of the AVC include National Railway and Continental Tire North America.

"The growth and interest has just been phenomenal," Knutson said. "It shows what can happen when you have the community partners like we have."