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Inland Empire health care workforce hits the road to recovery



(Photo Credit: Angel Cardenas)

If you live in California's Inland Empire and need a medical specialist, there's a good chance you won't find one close to home, especially if you're looking for one of the seven doctors, surgeons and therapists Michelle Evans uses to care for her 17-month-old son, Hudson.

"To me it's worth the drive to Children's," Evans said. "All of his paperwork is in their computer. When he was born, [his records were] everywhere. The neurosurgeon was in Pomona. The neurologist was in Upland."

Yet, she continues weekly treks to L.A., Arcadia, Pasadena and other California cities, sometimes more than an hour's drive from her Wrightwood home in San Bernardino County for appointments with specialists focusing on all that Hudson's condition entails.

The IE's shortage of health care workers isn't limited to highly skilled specialists. There aren't enough nursing assistants, doctors and surgeons in the region that [falls far below the national average](#) for registered nurses.

The reasons for the shortfall are two-fold. First, and perhaps foremost, is the lack of qualified health care workers in the region. According to John Husing, the chief economist for the [Inland Empire Economic Partnership](#) (IEEP), only 20 percent of the region's adults hold at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 30 percent in Los Angeles and 40 percent in the Bay Area.

Paul Granillo, IEEP's president and CEO, who also co-chairs the California Economic Summit Steering Committee, said, "Our population of 4.4 million people makes us equal to the 25th largest state in the U.S. Prior to the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, we were already under-represented regarding health care providers, and we added 500,000 people to our rolls under the Affordable Care Act."

The ongoing retirement of a whole generation will further worsen the IE's shortage of health care workers.

"Many people in the health care workforce now are baby boomers," said Harris Koenig, CEO of San Antonio Regional Hospital. "And they themselves use health care at four times the rate of the general population. That aging workforce is going to leave a void."

Those two factors prompted hospital CEO's, school administrators and a variety of community and business leaders to team up as a collaboration called the [Convergence](#). The group serves San Bernardino and Riverside counties, as well as Eastern San Gabriel Valley. An estimated 16,000 new health care jobs will need to be filled in those areas by 2017.

The goal is to create a pipeline of students from high schools and universities to head directly into health care jobs that are, or will soon be, in demand. That goal aligns with the work of the California Economic Summit which convenes its [annual gathering on November 12 and 13](#) in the Inland Empire. At the Summit, attendees will brainstorm solutions to create one million more middle-skill workers for in-demand, high-pay jobs, such as those in health care.

Medical providers participating in the Convergence will agree to fast track a graduating student's job application to improve their chances of starting a new career.

"The idea is so logical I don't know why we didn't do it sooner," said Dr. Devorah Lieberman, Ph.D., Convergence leader and president of the University of La Verne, one of 30 participating schools, hospitals and health care providers on a roster that continues to grow. "We're calling it the Convergence because it's so many different organizations coming together to meet the shortages in this region. We're doing exactly what California Forward does, which is engage others about workforce and economic needs."

Koenig explained the physician-to-population ratio in the IE is comparable to Arkansas. "Everybody knows how to build doctors," said Koenig. "But for some of these other jobs, how do we start in the secondary school system, stimulate interest in health care and create paths to make sure we're creating the manpower we need for the future?"

The monumental task of coordinating the Convergence falls on [Reach Out](#), an organization specializing in forming partnerships to strengthen the IE and Pomona Valley. While it's an administrative mountain of charts and projections, Reach Out's executive director Diana Fox is very aware of the faces behind the statistics, including Evan's son, Hudson.

"I'm always saying, 'Let's bring baby Hudson home to the IE,'" said Fox. "There's no reason for spending hours in traffic every single week because the medical treatment he needs isn't available in the IE. Three years ago, and for several years prior, we only had one pediatric endocrinologist for the entire Inland Empire. A child suffering epileptic seizures would have to wait six months for an appointment. Now it's not quite as bad but those types of things in the specialty field really drives the shortages."

Lieberman says the fact that colleges and universities participating in the Convergence are sharing data and resources is both impressive and unprecedented.

"It means they're willing to be an active participant in creating pathways to jobs for students," said Lieberman. "Jobs that will keep them in this region."

The status of the IE's health care workforce is in near-critical condition, which explains the intense focus on its recovery. The Convergence project is designed to be an ongoing effort and it's currently working on a five-year plan to increase the number of student graduates in the IE. In the meantime, it will release a report in January showing schools and universities where specific health care workers are needed the most

The private sector is already taking notice. Randall W. Lewis, the executive vice president for marketing at the Lewis Group of Companies, a real estate developer, said he's been involved in "healthy community efforts" for years, as well as the Convergence since its inception. The Convergence plans to hire a grad student to provide 10 to 15 hours a week in administrative support, and Lewis and his wife will fund the student's salary.

"There are powerful things that can happen at the local level," said Lewis. "It's the power of committed people trying to make something happen. The test will be three or five years from now when we ask ourselves, are we making a difference? Does Convergence matter? I think it will."

And hopefully help keep families like Melissa and her son closer to home.