

SUNY offering free community college tuition to address nursing shortage in New York

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VICTOR, N.Y. — SUNY's Reconnect program is aiming to address New York's worker shortage by offering free community college tuition to adult learners for several industries – most notably nursing, which healthcare leaders say have faced shortages in recent years.

The [SUNY Reconnect program](#) targets New York State residents between the ages of 25 and 55 who do not already have a college degree. The program has enrolled 5,600 students statewide, with 3,124 in the nursing program alone.

News10NBC spoke with SUNY Chancellor John King during his tour of the Finger Lakes Community College Victor campus, which features several SUNY Reconnect programs.

"We anticipate a huge nursing shortage, not only in New York, but nationwide," King said. "And so this is an opportunity to get folks into the pipeline to fill those much needed roles."

King says Gov. Kathy Hochul has also proposed in her budget expanding the nursing program to allow people who already have a bachelor's degree to come back to community college and get a nursing degree through the SUNY Reconnect program.

To address the shortage, Highland Hospital held a nurse recruitment fair Thursday evening.

Dannielle Barry, Nurse Recruitment Manager of Highland Hospital, said the hospital brought more than 50 staff nurses and nurse leaders from different units to talk about their experiences.

"We're hoping about 50 soon-to-be nurses or already experienced nurses come and take a look and consider Highland for employment," Barry said.

Jennifer Rohan, who's graduating from a separate nursing program in August, said the SUNY Reconnect program offers a good opportunity for career changes.

“When you’re at that age 25, it’s really a good time to like pick a career path,” Rohan said. “And sometimes people don’t know right away what they want to do. So like for me, I came from education and, you know, after 23 years in education, I was like, I want to do a change.”

Rohan’s classmate, Nicole Valenti, said the free tuition makes the program appealing.

“I’m 24, so I think that seeing the other people in our program that are older, that have had previous careers, that it would be a really good segue into finding something new and different, especially with it being free of cost,” Valenti said.

The SUNY Reconnect program offers more than just nursing degrees. Monroe Community College participates in the program and offers free two-year degrees in computer science and information technology, construction technology and environmental sciences, and education studies.

Rochester’s nursing union, RUNAP, sent the following statement regarding the SUNY Reconnect program, and efforts to limit the nursing shortage:

We applaud the use of public resources for education and expanding access to the nursing field. However, the core issue is not a lack of people who want to be or are ready to be nurses – in fact Rochester has several nursing schools in the area and RGH regularly recruits new graduates as well as experienced staff.

Unsafe staffing and poor working conditions drive nurses away from RGH or the field altogether. While the improvements won by our union have resulted in an increase from 838 to 1,089 staff RNs at RGH since 2022, hundreds more are needed for truly safe staffing.

Retention is essential – in order to provide a safe environment, new nurses and healthcare workers across positions need to learn from experienced colleagues.

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