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## **Nurse shortage called health peril State must act, Pa. Dems told**

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Pennsylvania hospital patients face an increased risk of death and medical errors if the state fails to deal with a growing shortage of nurses, witnesses told a panel of state House Democrats yesterday.

The shortage - likely to widen to 30 percent of needed nurses by 2020 - is "not just a work force crisis, but [a cause of] preventable deaths and injuries," said Bill Cruice, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals.

He and other representatives of medical workers, nursing schools, hospitals and state government spoke as the panel met at Thomas Jefferson University in Center City for the first of several hearings on medical issues on which the minority Democrats hope to forge an action plan this fall with Gov. Rendell.

The nursing shortage, said deputy House minority whip Todd A. Eachus, D-Hazleton, after the session, "is going to be a key priority for the Democratic caucus."

Cruice, an attorney, described the nursing shortage as "a crisis that is only going to get worse." He cited a state Health Department report showing the state fell 5,400 short of the needed number of registered nurses in 2000 (a 5 percent gap), with the shortfall expected to widen to 17,000 nurses by 2010 and 40,000 by 2020. There's also a shortage of licensed practical nurses or LPNs.

Referring to a study by prominent scientists who blamed as many as 98,000 deaths a year on medical errors nationwide, Cruice said such errors, often as a result of inadequate medical staff levels, are "one of the most significant health problems in Pennsylvania." He said the number of fatal errors more than doubles when researchers count cases of failure to rescue dying patients, and deaths of low-risk patients from infections.

Marilyn Hostetter, nurse coordinator for the Pennsylvania Healthcare Union, SEIU 1199P, also maintained the nursing crisis is tied to patient safety.

While nursing school representatives explored the need for better recruiting, more flexible training programs and better teacher salaries, Hostetter emphasized that much of the problem is retaining nurses once they're on the job.

"Once people do become nurses, something is driving them away," she said. She urged the panel, known as the Democratic leadership's Healthcare Accountability and Excellence Response Team, to follow through on legislation to ban mandatory overtime for nurses except in outright emer-

gencies, and to set limits on the number of patients per nurse.

Several speakers pointed to a potential worsening of the shortage as “baby boomer” nurses age. The average nurse in Pennsylvania is 45 years old, an age when many nurses are thinking about leaving the profession.

Nurses often “are devalued, underpaid” and overburdened with demands, said Alaf Meleis, dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing.

She and others stressed the importance of increased diversity in the ranks of nurses, who are overwhelmingly white and female.

Meanwhile, nursing schools are trying to bolster their capacity to train more nurses.

Among the problems in building up nursing schools: Faculty members don’t make as much as experienced nurses, said Victoria Rich, chief nursing officer and associate hospital administrator for the University of Pennsylvania.