

Hearing seeks answers to shortage of nurses

BY DOYLE MURPHY
murphy@greeleytrib.com

Congress members and leaders in the nursing field gathered Wednesday at the University of Northern Colorado to discuss the nation's shortage of nurses and nursing educators.

Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo., and Rep. Jon Porter, R-Nev., had a Congressional hearing to gather information from industry experts and UNC President Kay Norton. Speakers said there are plenty of students applying to nursing programs. The problem, they said, is there aren't enough instructors to teach them — a byproduct of an aging work force dwindling with retirement and salaries \$10,000-\$20,000 less per year than an instructor could earn in the

industry.

"I don't know too many people who want to move forward in their career for less money," Musgrave said.

Norton said the market is to blame for the salary gap. She said while business and engineering professors generally demand greater salaries because of their value in private industry, the market hasn't closed that gap for fields such as nursing. Nurses training programs are forced to pay low salaries or increase students' tuition.

Another problem is the lack of nurses qualified to become full-time faculty members. According to a 2004 report from the Colorado Center for Nursing Excellence, only 1 percent of nursing professionals have the doctorate needed to join faculty.

To combat that problem, UNC created an online doctoral program in nursing education that makes it more convenient for students to qualify for top nursing education positions. It also helps reach students in rural areas.

UNC and the Center for Nursing Excellence are also searching for funding to create a nursing think tank in Greeley. The center would offer professional development and examine current and future nursing education.

Members of a nurses union called Service Employees International Union made up about 20 of the 50-60 people at the hearing. Members hoped to testify, but missed the deadline to sign up. Scott Wasserman, spokesman for the group, said education is only part of the problem. They say poor work conditions in

hospitals force many trained nurses out of the industry.

"This is great, but if you don't improve retention in the hospitals it isn't going to make any difference," Wasserman said.

Musgrave met with union members for about 20 minutes after the hearing. She said she appreciates their concerns, but another committee would have to make those changes; Wednesday's hearing had jurisdiction to deal with education issues only. She said she'd steer members to the right committee.

Musgrave's Democratic opponent in the upcoming race for the 4th Congressional District, State Sen. Angie Paccione of Fort Collins, attended the hearing. She said Musgrave's voting record on nursing issues doesn't mesh with the

concern she displayed. Musgrave voted for Association Health Plans, which critics say strips some state health protections. She also voted for an early version of a budget for the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education departments, which cut funding for programs designed to aid nursing programs and improve conditions for nurses. Musgrave voted for a final version that would have restored funding with a slight increase.

"Don't come back to your district and tell us you're doing something and then go back there and vote against it," Paccione said.

Musgrave said she'd never voted against nurses and called Paccione's comments a "cheap, political shot" during an event designed for education, not politics.