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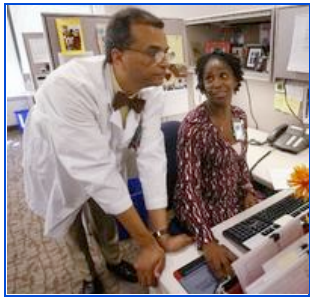
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Part 4 - Day 3: Few well-paid black workers

It happened so many times as Shanda Ross made her hospital rounds, she learned to take it in stride.



Shanda Ross, right, with fellow registered nurse Aaron Miller at the Nebraska Medical Center. Ross says the time and effort it took to become an RN have paid off — she earns much more than she did as a nurses' aide.

As she stood bedside, patients or their kin would sometimes direct their questions not to Ross, a black registered nurse, but to the nurse's aide assisting her, who was white. Based on skin color alone, they'd assume the aide was the nurse.

"Sometimes it would take a while for them to grasp who was the nurse," said Ross, who works at the Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

While the patients' confusion probably was based in racial stereotypes, such thinking also has some foundation in reality.

Black nurses are rare in the Omaha area, their numbers well below the national average. At the same time, Omaha has above-average numbers of black nurses' aides.

Those disparities underscore the critical role that failure to attain good-paying jobs and the required education have played in giving Omaha one of the highest black poverty rates in the nation.

While nurses and nurses' aides work in the same field, the jobs are really worlds apart.

The average pay for a nurses' aide in the metro: less than \$25,000.

Average pay for a registered nurse: almost \$52,000.

While nurses' aides have limited clinical care responsibilities and receive just weeks of training, registered nurses are medical professionals required to complete at least two years of specialized college training.

Such disparities between the best- and least-paying jobs can be found throughout Omaha's black work force.

A World-Herald analysis of U.S. Census employment data found that, compared with black workers nationally, even after adjusting for the city's demographics, Omaha's black workers are far less likely to work in good-paying jobs that require significant education and training. At the same time, Omaha-area blacks are overrepresented in jobs with low pay and fewer skills.

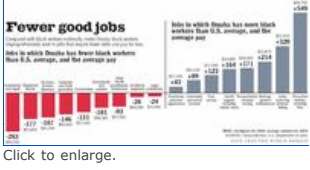
If the Omaha area's job mix for blacks mirrored that of blacks nationally, the metro would have 177 more black registered nurses — about doubling the actual number of black nurses in the city. Additionally, there would be hundreds more blacks working as teachers, accountants, computer specialists, lawyers, engineers and skilled union craftspeople.

It's no wonder that census surveys over the past two years put Omaha's black poverty rate the fifth-highest in the nation among America's 100 largest metro areas, with the third-largest disparity between white and black poverty.

"When you look at income inequality, you have to consider the role of education," said Jason Henderson, chief of the Federal Reserve's Omaha office. "Education is an investment in yourself. I don't think a lot of people understand that."

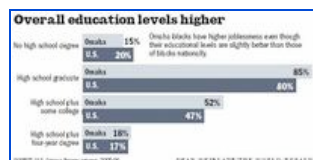
Henderson and others say such figures underscore the need to boost education and training for those in Omaha's minority communities.

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Marty Shukert, a consultant working with the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce on an economic development plan for north Omaha, said the analysis helps point out potential areas on which to focus future initiatives, such as health care and skilled crafts.

"They represent enormous opportunities," he said.



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To be sure, black workers nationally are underrepresented compared with white workers in most higher-paying occupations. Overall, a white worker is 40 percent more likely to be employed in a management or professional occupation than a black worker. And, for example, blacks hold 5 percent of nursing jobs nationally while representing 12 percent of the U.S. population.

But the issue is more acute in Omaha, where black workers hold jobs in high-paying occupations at markedly lower rates than blacks nationally.

Using detailed jobs survey data for 2000, the most recent available, The World-Herald compared occupations of the metro area's 22,000 black workers with those of black workers nationally. The analysis took into account both the size of Omaha's black community and how Omaha's overall job mix differs from the nation's.

Often, the metro area's gaps in higher-paying employment for blacks translate into hundreds of jobs. Along with 177 more black nurses, Omaha also would have 167 more black teachers, corporate trainers and librarians; 101 more black accountants and auditors; and 146 more computer and math specialists if its black workers represented those fields to the same degree blacks do nationally.

Black workers were underrepresented in good-paying craft occupations, too, including 131 fewer construction workers and 263 fewer in installation and repair.

Occupations where metro-area black workers had markedly above-average representation compared with the nation were nearly all in lower-paying fields, including food service, health care support, building maintenance, sales and telemarketing, community and social services, production and transportation.

Why is Omaha so lacking in well-paid black workers?

Job discrimination can't be ruled out as a contributing factor. Overall, educational levels for Omaha's black population are slightly better than the nation's, though blacks nationally are making bigger gains.

However, most of the fields where Omaha is significantly low in black workers require specialized training and skills.

Nursing is a prime example.

With the large baby boomer population quickly aging, nurses are in high demand. That means anyone who completes nursing school is virtually guaranteed a job in the field.

However, not only are there few black nurses — the 2000 Census data suggest Omaha blacks held 220 of the metro area's 7,657 nursing jobs — but black enrollment in nursing schools also is low.

Dani Eveloff, recruiting coordinator for the University of Nebraska Medical Center's College of Nursing, touts the flexible hours, future demand and great pay. She has recruiting materials directly targeting minority students. When she has academically qualified candidates, she walks them through the application and financial aid process.

Still, of 1,017 nursing students at UNMC's four campuses statewide, only 16 are black.

Two-year, associate's degree nursing programs have more black students, with 24 black students among Metropolitan Community College's enrollment of 145.

But Metro has even higher black enrollments in its certified nursing assistant program, the weeks-long training program that qualifies graduates to work as nurses' aides. In Metro's latest class, 36 of 147 students are black.

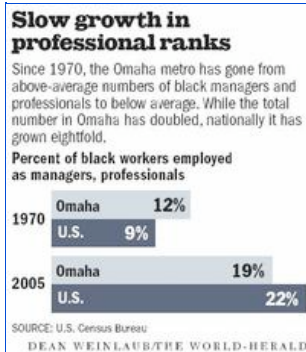
In fact, in no other job is there a higher representation of black workers in Omaha than nurses' aide. Some 20 percent of all nurses' aides in the Omaha metro area are black (the next closest is bus driver, 19 percent). It's an entry-level job in health care that pays \$7 to \$11 an hour, about half what a nurse earns.

"It's quick and easy and relatively cheap compared to nursing school," UNMC's Eveloff said.

Though the job might seem a natural step toward a career in nursing, it appears a limited number of black nurses' aides continue their education. And that's despite the fact many health care facilities offer tuition assistance, loan forgiveness and other programs.

For example, Alegent Health offers a career advancement program that allows any entry-level employee to go to part-time status, directly pays tuition and fees and gives them a supplemental \$350 stipend per pay period to help pay their bills.

However, of 56 Alegent workers who have taken advantage of the program, only four have been black. One completed it, two are in school and one dropped out.



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Getting more education can be a big barrier for people struggling to pay bills and provide for a family.

"It sounds simple to say, 'It's just a couple of years in school,'" said Dr. Rubens Pamies, UNMC's vice chancellor for academic affairs. "But it's not simple. It's very difficult."

Carolyn Cotton, a black nurse at the Nebraska Medical Center who graduated from an accelerated nursing program, said many nurses' aides she talks to simply aren't aspiring to move up.

"They start these front-line jobs and become complacent," Cotton said. "They get caught up in working and the daily drama of life."

Ross knows those dramas. She once struggled to help support her family on the pay of a nurses' aide.

Inspired by a mother who suffered from health problems, Ross grew up wanting to be a nurse.

Then life intervened. She married her high school sweetheart, had a son and went to work as a nurses' aide. Dependent on the \$10-an-hour paycheck, it was hard to imagine going to college.

But one day, she decided it was time. "I figured I could continue to struggle for the rest of my life or I could struggle for four years," she said.

Ross was lucky. While many black women in north Omaha face the solitary struggle of single parenthood, she had a husband who ran his own lawn service. She also continued to put in hours as a nurses' aide and took out thousands of dollars in student loans.

The payoff in the end was a big economic leap ahead.

"It's rewarding financially, plus there's a lot of personal satisfaction," Ross said. "I'm very proud."

Ross recently took a post as a presurgical screening nurse, clearing patients for surgery. And she's aiming higher, next year planning to start a master's degree program that would allow her to pursue health care administration.

Stacey Ocander, dean of Metro's health programs, said both health educators and health care facilities in Omaha should do more to encourage minority nurses' aides to pursue registered nurse degrees and provide the support and flexible schedules that would allow them to balance school, work and home.

"We do a poor job moving these folks through and encouraging them to go on," she said. "I think that's the job of everyone in health care."

Ross says she's trying to do her part, urging nurses' aides she works with to get back to school. She can show them the payoff.

"If you can buckle down and get through it, life will be so much better."

HELP WANTED: Where the jobs are

ALEGENT HEALTH

Largest not-for-profit health care system in Nebraska and southwest Iowa.

Employees: 8,600.

Salaries: Starting hourly wages range from \$8.62 to \$20.

Jobs available: Service support, business support, allied health nursing services.

Minority recruitment efforts: Sponsor of INROADS program that supports and mentors minorities through nursing school. Partners with the new St. Peter Claver Catholic High School in south Omaha where students spend Fridays in the workplace.

Training: New employees attend a three-day orientation and undergo additional orientation within their location and department. Offers employees tuition reimbursement, a loan forgiveness program for certain disciplines, free education classes and advanced professional scholarships. Offers a career advancement program for current employees interested in becoming a registered nurse.

Applicants' barriers: Poor work history. Also, applicants who are dishonest or apply for jobs outside their qualifications, education and experience.

LOZIER CORP.

Manufacturer of store fixtures for grocery and retail stores, 6336 John J. Pershing Drive.

Employees: 2,000 nationally; 1,000 to 1,100 in Omaha.

Salaries: Entry-level hourly wage \$12.67; rising to \$13.05 in December.

Jobs available: Manufacturing and warehouse jobs typically open in summer; almost no hiring in winter months.

Minority recruitment efforts: For-hire signs are posted along Pershing Drive. Employees can refer people to apply.

Training: Weeklong new-hire orientation includes work hardening, safety training.

Job barriers: People need a background in physical labor.

C&A INDUSTRIES INC.

Parent company to several staffing and recruiting firms, including Aureus Medical Group, one of the largest health care staffing firms in the nation. Headquarters at 13609 California St.

Employees: 500, including 450 in Omaha; approximately 3,000 contract employees nationwide. Company plans to add more than 100 new positions by the end of 2008 and 300 to 400 in the next three to four years.

Salaries: From \$22,000 annually in starting administrative support positions to up to \$65,000 in the first year in medical sales/recruitment.

Jobs available: Medical sales/recruitment, professional and administrative positions.

Minority recruitment efforts: Recruits generally at career fairs and colleges and through print and radio ads, electronic media and a strong online marketing presence.

Training: Depending on the position, new employees receive two to 12 weeks of training. Mentoring and other professional development, including tuition reimbursement, offered.

Applicants' barriers: Skills and qualifications that don't match position requirements.

- Compiled by Erin Grace

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