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## BUSINESS



SECTION

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**"... saw health care as more stable, especially compared to what I was doing."**

JASON GALANG, 28, who was laid off from his job as a risk analyst at Charles Schwab and will start a phlebotomy training course Monday



Photos by MICHAEL MAGOR/The Chronicle

Students at Bay Area Medical Academy in San Francisco practice blood-drawing techniques on each other. The school trains phlebotomists, medical techs and EKG techs.

## Career opportunities in health care

Despite the slumping economy, hospitals and clinics are in need of nurses and skilled medical technicians

By Victoria Coliver  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Jeff Bledsoe's arms were bandaged and covered with bruises, but he considers that just part of the learning process.

The 53-year-old Brisbane resident, who retired after 19 years as a computer programmer, was studying for a new career in phlebotomy, or blood drawing, by taking a two-week intensive class followed by clinical training.

"There's not really much in my field right now, so I've decided to do something different," Bledsoe said.

Risk analyst Jason Galang, 28, worked nearly six years at Charles Schwab before being laid off in November. Galang starts a four-week course, also in phlebotomy, on Monday. He was drawn to the profession in part because it doesn't require a lot of training.

"I always saw health care as more rewarding — you're helping people in need," said Galang, who has a business degree from San Francisco State University. "I also saw health care as more stable, especially compared to what I was doing."

Bledsoe and Galang are part of a growing group of workers who are changing

careers and moving into one of the few job sectors that is actually hiring: health care.

While the federal government reported that nearly 2 million jobs were lost during the last four months of 2008, health care continued to hire more workers than any other sector. The industry added more than 30,000 jobs in December, for a total of 372,000 in 2008.

Many of those December gains — more than 14,000 — were in ambulatory health care services: doctors' offices, dental practices, labs and other outpatient

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Jeff Bledsoe (left) and Giovanni Fratangelo take a final exam at the school, where they are studying to become phlebotomists.

# Medical technicians in demand

## ► JOBS

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care services. Hospitals added nearly 12,000 jobs, and about 5,500 were created in residential care and nursing homes.

Workers in greatest demand are phlebotomists, medical assistants, laboratory and pharmacy technicians — positions important to the industry but which often require just a high school diploma and weeks or months of training.

Known as allied health professions, these represent most of the jobs in health care aside from doctors, registered nurses, pharmacists and dentists. Salaries for these jobs vary depending on training, demand and setting, but phlebotomists typically make about \$20 an hour and medical assistants can earn from \$14 to more than \$20.

"We've seen an increase across the board in applicants, and we've certainly seen more qualified applicants," said Linda Squires Grohe, dean of City College of San Fran-

cisco's School of Health and Physical Education. "We have more students than we have positions."

The logjam of students at schools like City College, which provides training for a wide array of allied health jobs, has spawned the growth of private schools like the Bay Area Medical Academy, which started offering classes in 2005 and provides training for phlebotomists, medical assistants and electrocardiogram technicians.

These schools tend to be more expensive than public schools, but often have flexible hours and no waiting list. The Bay Area Medical Academy charges \$1,100 for a 60-hour EKG certification course and \$2,250 for phlebotomy licensing. An 11-month course for medical assistants, which includes phlebotomy and EKG certification, costs \$7,000.

The school's founder, Simoni-da Cvejic, said she's seen a 30 percent increase in applicants over the past year, which she attributes largely to the changing economy.

She's seen a lot of students like Bledsoe and Galang who are switching careers, either by choice or necessity.

"There are a lot of people who are unemployed from other industry," Cvejic said. "They see (health care) as a safe haven right now. It is impacted, but more secure than any other industry right now."

But health experts warn that getting trained for an allied health career isn't a surefire path to a job, especially in the Bay Area.

Hospitals and clinics are coming under growing strain due to the economy. A report released this month by the California Hospital Association found a 33 percent increase in uninsured patients visiting emergency rooms. That, combined with a 30 percent decrease in elective procedures and other pressures such as low Medi-Cal funding, means less revenue for hospitals.

Demand remains high for graduates of City College's respiratory therapy program, and for cardiovascular technicians, paramedics and diagnostic medical imaging and radiation technicians, Grohe said.

But the nursing professions — registered nurses, licensed vocational nurses, certified nursing assistants — have faced tougher hiring prospects, particularly in the Bay Area. Still, she said, nurses remain in great demand in many parts of the state, such as the Cen-

## Wanted: health care workers

A survey released this month of more than 100 community clinics in California found the lack of health care workers such as licensed vocational nurses, medical assistants and laboratory technicians is putting a strain on the nonprofit centers. Among the findings:

- 81 percent of clinics said it's a challenge to keep the positions filled with qualified workers.
- Clinics cited licensed vocational nurses, case managers and dental assistants as the most difficult positions to fill.

Source: Godwin Simon Victoria Research

tral Valley, the Inland Empire and many rural communities.

"What we're telling these new grads is cast their net out a little farther if they expect to find a job," Grohe said, adding that she encourages graduates to consider jobs in skilled nursing facilities if hospitals are not hiring. "The jobs are there, but the Bay Area is unusual in that it's very desirable and people come from all over the country, for that matter the world, to work."

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