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YOUNGSTOWN -- A summit meeting of Mahoning Valley health-care leaders began the process of overcoming the seeming paradox of high unemployment in the area while job vacancies in their industry go wanting.

The Mahoning Valley Regional Healthcare Workforce Summit was conducted Tuesday to address the problems of attracting, developing and retaining a skilled work force to serve the growing needs of an aging population. N. Kristopher Hoce, president and chief executive officer of Forum Health, and Michael T. Rowan, who holds those positions at Humility of Mary Health partners, convened the summit at Youngstown State University.

Hoce and Rowan were joined by Howard E. Rohleder and Melvin Creely, presidents and CEOs of Salem Community Hospital and East Liverpool City Hospital, respectively, in a panel discussion of the "challenge of thinking differently about the human capital in health care."

Collaboration was the summit watch word among the competitors for employees and customers.

The only way to provide the services that are needed is to work together. Alone, Forum Health does not have the resources to solve the problem, Hoce said.

Attracting employees

One way to work together to entice people into the health-care industry is to make young people aware, even at the junior high school level when they begin to make career choices, of the opportunities in the industry, Rohleder said.

Collaboration is also needed between hospitals and educational institutions to provide a flow of employable people, Creely said.

"We can't be all things to all people. We have to work together to share the resources," he said.

Rowan agreed that hospitals need to work together to fill their vacancies but said there is a need for community-wide participation in producing people who are trained and prepared to enter the health-care work force.

"We need to involve the entire community so they [the jobs seekers] will have a work

ethic and know what it is to hold a job," he said.

Hoce said a particular problem the market causes is that hospitals spend money and time training people, and then loses them because of working hours or other reasons to the hospitals' competitors.

"It causes us to wonder how much to collaborate. As nonprofits, we have to consider the good of the whole community, but [the cost and losses] makes us take a step back," Hoce said.

Creely said the health-care industry needs to become more politically involved to make sure adequate funding gets channeled to universities and other employee training sites.

However, Hoce said the area is "short on the political clout necessary" to get the funding to achieve some of these things.

Quality of life issue

Rowan believes the health-care industry, as the Valley's second leading employer, can have a tremendous effect on the quality of life and creating the kind of community people want to live in.

"Until we make our neighborhoods safer and more comfortable places to live and work ... it will be hard to keep our youth. There is a brain drain," he said.

Creely said his vision for the Mahoning Valley is that it reverses what it is becoming and instead is a place where people want to live and raise their children and get their health care.

But Hoce warned that the Mahoning Valley is an aging and very unhealthy community, leading to an increased demand for decreasing resources.

"It's an opportunity, but we need to work on it now," he said.

A second panel discussed strategies for attracting, retaining and developing a health-care work force.

A core problem, said Louis N. Harris, director of respiratory care program and a professor in the Department of Health professions at YSU, is that high school students are not informed about opportunities in health care, partially because high school counselors are not aware.

The industry needs to do a better job of identifying and accessing the emerging work force of Hispanics and others who have not been traditionally thought of, said Melissa

DeLisio, assistant director at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

Respect and diversity are the key words in retaining employees, summit keynote speaker Dr. Carolyn A. Martin told the health-care managers. To make a better workplace, be a great person to work with and create an environment in which people can be successful on their own terms, said Martin, an educator, author and expert on generational differences in the workplace. The key to recruiting the best people of all generations is marketing the organization as the place to be by every person in the organization, not just one person or one department.

The key to why people stay or leave a job, or produce or slack on the job, is the relationship they have with their front-line managers. "If you can create an environment where people can be heard and feel successful, I'm sure your organization will be successful," she concluded.