



Healthcare Careers: Worth the Investment

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Prior to the market collapses and the economic downturn in 2008 that seemed to bring hiring to an abrupt halt in all sectors, the healthcare industry was at the top of the list in terms of job growth. Anticipating huge numbers of retirees, as well as the entrance of more baby boomers into the system, the industry looked like it would have a severe shortage of manpower very soon. Multiple efforts from both the private businesses and the government were launched in an attempt to bulk up on the number of skilled workers in direct care professions.

But when long-time employees had retirement investments nearly wiped out, spouses losing their jobs, rising costs and mounting bills, many postponed retirement. The mass exodus of healthcare workers was delayed. Lower profit margins and reimbursement rates forced hospitals to cut back on expenses, meaning hiring freezes. At the same time, the newly unemployed began considering career changes into what had been predicted as a "high growth" field. What did this mean for the millions of training dollars allocated to produce new health care workers?

Project HEALTH I

In Berkshire County, a \$500,000 WCTF grant was already underway. Awarded in 2007 with a goal of putting 125 people on career paths in health care, 20 people had already earned a full-fledged industry credential such as Certified Nurse Assistant or Licensed Practical Nurse. Another 20 were in progress and about 80 were in the beginning stages of preparing to enter a certificate program. Clearly people received occupational training for health care professions but what about their employment outlook?

According to a MA Senior Care study of long-term care, vacancy rates in Western MA facilities have, in recent years, been among the highest in the state. This is one area where the mitigating factors of the economic downturn did little to impact the need for workers. With 7 local rehabilitation/nursing care centers participating in the grant program and at least 5 others in the area needing skilled workers, jobs oppor-



Akiko Fry at LPN pinning ceremony at Berkshire Community College

tunities were available for all of the program's graduating participants. Thanks to the commitment of the partner employers to promote employees who have taken the initiative to move up to the next rung on the nursing career ladder, final tallies show that 90% of the individuals earning a nursing credential (CNA, LPN or RN) obtained new employment or received a job promotion & wage gain. What of the remaining 10%? Those are the ones who opted to go to college full-time to continue on to the next level in their nursing education.

Round Two

In 2010, new initiatives from the federal government to stimulate the economy and create jobs have given the Berkshires the opportunity to build on the success of Project HEALTH. In this second round of funding, a reassessment of the industry's needs has led to some modifications in the program design and goals. The other variable to now consider is both the state of Massachusetts' universal health care system and the recent federal legislation that was passed on health care reform. With more people covered by insurance and making use of services, there will be an increase in patient load which translates to additional manpower to assist the growing numbers. And with mandates like Electronic Medical Records, the demand for skilled healthcare professionals goes beyond direct care workers, requiring medical coders, billers and information technology specialists.

Project HEALTH II will be focusing on making sure that entry-level health care



Students explore careers in health care at Berkshire Community College Simulation Lab (Michael Foss, instructor)

workers have the skills they need to move up the career ladder at a faster pace. A new program will couple CNA training with training in applied math and writing skills; the goal being to certify Nursing Aides who are ready to begin college-level studies for a certificate or degree in a health-related occupation. This pilot program is for individuals with a high school diploma or GED who are interested in beginning a career in health care as a Nurse Assistant and eventually going on to college for further training. The curriculum includes applied math and writing workshops to assist participants in clearing the initial hurdle of passing the college entrance exam (Accuplacer). At the end of the math/writing series, students will enter a 4 week CNA program. All costs for this program are covered by the grant and job placement services are provided as well. The program is looking for applicants to participate in this program which will run from September 2010-January 2011. For more information, call Marya LaRoche at the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board, 413-442-7177 x101.

To effect sustainable change in the career pathway for nursing and other health-related fields, officials from both the business and education sectors will be working together to identify opportunities to improve the alignment and acceleration of healthcare education and training pathways that lead to Associate's Degrees. Two ideas that will

be explored are awarding some value to a student's completion of nursing program pre-requisites and the development of a clinical internship experience to build the skills and confidence of new LPN graduates to improve their success rates in Associate Degree in Nursing programs.

Engaging Youth

It is also important to mention the work that is being done to engage youth as the future of our workforce. Much of the training now focuses on career changers and improving the skills of entry level workers. In an effort to generate a quality pool of candidates for future training programs and professions, a Community-Based Jobs Training Grant in collaboration with STCC has provided resources for a Medical Encounters program for high school students. In conjunction with the SIMS lab at Berkshire Community College, a program by World Is Our Classroom has been offered 5 times this semester to spark student interest in science-based study and give them a taste of working with patients in a medical setting. The program has been received with great enthusiasm and 5 more sessions are planned for the fall of 2010. If you are a teacher with a 9th or 10th grade class that would be interested in this program, please contact Marya LaRoche at BCREB by email at projecthealth@berkshirereb.org. ■