

Education is the Solution to the Workforce Shortage

By Mary Pat Olson

The implementation of health care reform will have a great impact on hospitals; increasing the number of patients with both private and government-sponsored health insurance, while decreasing hospital reimbursement rates and calling for improved access to medical care in underserved areas. With these changes, the realization of reform may be hindered by the significant workforce shortage looming over the health care industry.

The demand for health care workers is growing exponentially to care for both our aging population and the increased number of newly insured patients seeking health care. In Illinois alone, there will be an estimated shortage of 21,000 nurses by 2020, according to the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES). IDES estimates that the number of registered nursing positions in the metropolitan Chicago area will grow more than 31 percent from 2006 to 2016 due to newly created and vacant positions.

But nursing isn't the only specialty in need of more skilled workers. The demand for both physical therapy assistants and home health aides in the metropolitan Chicago area is expected to more than double by 2016, according to IDES. Similar shortages are also expected for other health care occupations, such as physical therapists, pharmacists and health informatics specialists.

To fulfill the need for highly-skilled health care workers, hospitals are looking within their own ranks to identify entry-level workers interested in advancing their skill set and the potential for career growth with the "School at Work" program.

Two years ago, the Metropolitan Chicago Healthcare Council (MCHC) worked with the Chicago Department of Community Development and "School at Work" coordinators to bring the Catalyst Learning program to member hospitals. In 2009, St. Anthony Hospital's instituted the first "School at Work" program in the metropolitan Chicago area with a group of 18 students. After participating in the eight-month health care training program, which included on-site remediation in math, English and medical terminology, 17 of those students went on to enroll in community college programs to earn additional health care certifications and degrees.

Since the initial success, the metropolitan Chicago program has continued to grow. In 2010, 13 member hospitals and 149 students participated in the program. Of the enrolled students, 86 percent successfully completed the program and 46 enrolled in continuing education classes or received job promotions. This year, MCHC hopes to work with other project partners to create a seamless pathway for "School at Work" graduates to enroll in post-secondary education programs within the local community-college system.

Health care careers are booming and will continue to do so as the 78 million baby boomers in the U.S. continue to retire. The health care industry continues to generate millions of jobs; ten of the 20 fastest growing occupations are health care related. There is an abundance of data showing that health care careers are growing and that we are facing a shortage. But that data is useless unless we use it as a catalyst to action. We must be dedicated to addressing this shortage to ensure that our communities have access to health care in the future.



One solution to the workforce shortage is to facilitate the advancement of health science education programs, like “School at Work”. With the realization of health care reform, it is imperative that we focus our resources on resolving the workforce shortage by promoting health science education, industry engagement and advanced health care degree programs. MCHC will continue to identify new ways to engage workers and future workers at all skill levels to preserve health care in the metropolitan Chicago area. To learn more about “School at Work”, please contact me at (312) 906-6020 or mpolson@mchc.com.