

Learning on the Job Federal Initiative Trains Hospital Employees at Work

Story by Patrick Reilly, published January 26, 2004 in Modern Healthcare.

Hospitals are getting some help in combating workforce shortages from the U.S. Department of Labor, which launched a program last week to educate entry-level workers about healthcare careers. The initiative is the first of several by the department's Employment and Training Administration that is part of a \$15 million campaign to boost the healthcare workforce and ease the national nursing shortage.

"Nurses are front and center as one of the big issues," said Gay Gilbert, director of the department's business relations group. "Some innovative solutions are needed to overcome the crisis of the number of jobs that go unfilled."

The department, which has met with the American Hospital Association on workforce challenges, plans to fund projects to bring former healthcare workers back into the industry, help ensure colleges have enough faculty to train nurses and develop programs for entry-level workers, Gilbert said.

"We are experiencing a limited labor pool," Gilbert said. "It is such a critical issue."

The department earmarked \$2 million for the School at Work program, which debuted last week at 62 hospitals. Approximately 800 hospital workers from 13 states are participating in the program, which was funded by the department and developed by Catalyst Learning, a company that specializes in delivering education and training directly to hospitals and businesses. In addition to healthcare education, workers also learn skills such as arithmetic, reading and writing.

The University of Texas Medical Branch Hospitals, which include eight teaching hospitals in Galveston, have 23 employees enrolled in the nine-month program. Employees get paid time off from their jobs to attend the classes and study healthcare issues, including anatomy, ethics and medical terminology. At the end of the nine months, participants shoot for job advancement and look for promotions to clerical and clinical positions, such as nurse support technicians and patient-care and physical therapy aides. With a 5.4% nurse vacancy rate at the hospitals, University of Texas hospital administrators are hoping the program will help the workers advance their careers.

"With a foundation of healthcare knowledge in place, it is more likely that employees will enroll in nursing schools," said Kathy Shingleton, chief

human resources officer at the University of Texas Medical Branch.

"Many of these individuals will become nurses," Shingleton said. "This is getting them on track. They haven't explored these opportunities. At the end of the program, they will have a career development plan."

Hospitals are increasingly offering more programs and incentives for employees to advance their careers, said Debra Stock, vice president of member relations at the AHA. The efforts are helping hospitals reverse workforce shortages, especially in nursing, she said.

"They are paying off in the long run in terms of retention and growing the workforce internally," Stock said.

Ken Bancroft, president and chief executive officer at St. Agnes HealthCare, a 333-bed hospital in Baltimore, has seven employees in the School at Work program and said he expects long-term benefits to the hospital.

"These are people who have demonstrated a commitment to the organization," he said. "Many aspire for more education and higher paying jobs."

Catalyst Learning first introduced the program at 28 hospitals in September 2002. After the seven-month program concluded, 17% of students earned promotions at their hospitals and 38% enrolled in continuing education programs, such as nursing schools.

"It's a smart business decision because it costs less to promote from within," said Lynn Fischer, founder and president of Catalyst Learning.