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Health-care industry works to train its own

By TODD PACK
Staff Writer

Shy, without a high school diploma or the confidence to get one, Anna Skae-Caldwell considered herself fortunate to have a job as a file clerk in Centennial Medical Center's radiology department.

But when her boss asked whether she would be interested in a program that trains unskilled workers for better-paying jobs in health care, she said yes.

"I thought, 'I have a dream. Why not go for it?' " she said.

Skae-Caldwell, 42, who came to the United States from Malawi 18 years ago, is about to take her high-school equivalency exam and plans to enroll at Volunteer State Community College in the fall. She hopes to become a radiology technician.

She sees the hospital's offer of help as "the opportunity of a lifetime."

Centennial's parent, HCA Inc., calls it good business.

With demand for care far outpacing supply of labor, the Nashville hospital chain, like others in the industry, is doing more to develop its own work force.

Last year, for example, Centennial joined other HCA hospitals in offering School at Work, a federally funded program to help people such as Skae-Caldwell who want careers in health care but

lack training and can't go back to school because of demands of jobs or caring for children.

Once she gets her high school equivalency certificate, she will sign up for another federally funded program through the hospital that offers not only scholarships but also money for child care and transportation to employees studying for health-care jobs.

"It's been a wonderful project," HCA Chairman Jack O. Bovender Jr. said this week during a tour of Centennial by a senior official in the U.S. Department of Labor, which previously gave the company money for both programs.

So far, 60 HCA employees companywide have signed up for School at Work, while the company has awarded 1,500 scholarships since 2001. It has hired 200 graduates of the program to work at its hospitals.

Emily DeRocco, assistant secretary of labor for employment and training, said the programs show how government and health-care companies can work together "to face workforce challenges head on," although "our work is far from done."

Government forecasters say an aging population and advances in medical technology will drive a nearly 30% increase in health-care employment nationally over a 10-year period that began in 2002.

Jobs for diagnostic technicians, including those in Skae-Caldwell's field of radiology, are likely to increase about 25% from 2002 to 2012, while openings for occupational therapists are predicted to soar about 42%, according to government estimates.

But those fields are small compared with nursing.

Nationwide, there were 1.9 million registered nurses in the United States in 2002, compared with 254,000 diagnostic technicians and

58,000 occupational therapists, the bureau said.

By 2012, the number of RNs is expected to grow 28%, meaning hospitals would have to come up with thousands more qualified applicants.

Some local colleges and hospitals are trying to bridge the gap by working together.

This month, state regulators gave initial approval to Trevecca Nazarene University's plan to offer a bachelor's degree in nursing with Belmont University, which is building a \$22.5 million College of Health Sciences building on Wedgewood Avenue in Nashville.

HCA gave Belmont \$7.5 million to help build the facility, which is expected to draw students from Martin Methodist College and Columbia State Community College when it opens in 2006.

Belmont's new building will let the school double the size of its nursing program from 300 students to 600, said Debra Wollaber, dean of Belmont's nursing school.

"We don't do that right now because we're constrained by our facilities," she said. Belmont's nursing school is currently housed in a former church, she said. "We're meeting in Sunday school classrooms."

Likewise in Wilson County, University Medical Center donated vacant space in one of its buildings to Cumberland University's nursing school. Classes began at the Lebanon hospital last fall.

Today, about 14% of UMC's nursing jobs are open — a problem hospital administrators say should be lessened by the relocation of Cumberland's nursing school.

"How is that going to happen? It's very, very simple," Cumberland

President Harvill Eaton said.

Before the move, the school had about 110 students. With the additional space, "I'm doubling the size of the nursing school," meaning the school will eventually produce twice as many graduates, many of whom will probably apply for jobs at UMC.

Separately, UMC is offering \$2,500 a semester to employees working on their nursing degrees.

Chief executive Mark Crawford said workers don't have to repay the money if they agree to work at UMC after graduation. For each \$2,500 they receive, the hospital asks employees to work one year.

Saint Thomas Health Services in Nashville, meanwhile, just expanded the scope of its Jobs in Health Care job-training program, which is designed to teach people basic skills so they can fill entry-level jobs in areas such as medical records and patient transport.

In the past, if there were no vacancies at one of Saint Thomas' five Middle Tennessee hospitals, the nonprofit health system helped graduates find positions in unrelated fields, such as retail.

On Jan. 1, however, Saint Thomas changed its policy to help them find jobs with other hospital systems, said Catherine Self, vice president of organizational learning.

This spring, Saint Thomas will start a follow-up program at its Middle Tennessee Medical Center in Murfreesboro. It will be called Careers in Health and is designed to help entry-level workers prepare for careers in chronically understaffed areas such as nursing.

"We start them on their career," Self said.

Such programs should help ease the state's nursing shortage, said

Ann Duncan, executive director of the Tennessee Center for Nursing, a Nashville-based advocacy group.

"Last fall, schools of nursing in Tennessee turned away hundreds and hundreds of qualified applicants because they didn't have the faculty or, in some cases, the classroom space," she said yesterday.

Likewise, entry-level workers such as Skae-Caldwell say they are eager to pursue careers in health care if given a chance.

Skae-Caldwell said she'd thought it would be interesting work to take the X-ray pictures she filed every day but with an elementary school education, "I didn't think I could do the work."

When she took the first step, taking high-school equivalency classes, she was "terrified" or afraid she would embarrass herself.

But in time, Skae-Caldwell, a voracious reader despite her lack of schooling, discovered she could easily do the class work. She said she no longer tries to disappear in the back of the classroom but speaks up and actually enjoys taking part in class.

Skae-Caldwell, whose oldest daughter won a full scholarship to the University of Tennessee, says she is confident that she, too, will eventually earn a degree.

"Getting my high school diploma and going to college, this is a dream come true," she said. n

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