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Apprenticeships Provide Skills Needed Hard-to-Fill Health Jobs

By Stephenie Overman

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Apprenticeships are typically associated with construction and manufacturing jobs, but they can also provide the skills needed for a wide range of hard-to-fill health care jobs.

The U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL's) Office of Apprenticeship (<http://www.doleta.gov/OA/>) has developed apprenticeship programs for 40 health care occupations, including certified nursing assistant, laboratory technician, home health aide and licensed practical nurse.

The programs take an "earn while you learn" approach by combining on-the-job learning, related instruction with a mentor and incremental wage increases. Upon finishing the program, apprentices receive a nationally recognized, portable DOL certificate of completion.

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The advantage of health care apprenticeships over an internship is that apprenticeships better reinforce classroom learning. "An apprenticeship has a structure. There are modules in the classroom, then that is reinforced on the job," said Padma Arvind, director of Rutgers University's Healthcare Talent Development Center in New Brunswick, N.J.

Two specialized programs rolled out in January in New Jersey. One is for unemployed residents, ages 18 to 26, who did not complete high school. They are training to become community health workers. The second program aims to provide opportunities for domestic violence and sexual assault victims, military veterans, people with developmental and physical disabilities, and people living in transitional housing after incarceration. They are receiving dual training to become certified home health aides and certified nursing assistants.

The programs are the result of collaboration by the development center, which is part of Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, the DOL, the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and health care employers.

Previously, individuals were simply trained and placed into a pilot program, Arvind said, but "we got feedback from employers who felt people needed on-the-job training" as well as classroom instruction. She helped develop the curriculum and job-training

guidelines that were approved by the DOL and are now being used by other states as well.

"We're creating a new standard for public health workers. We work with the candidate, the supervisor, with HR. The employer is committed to paying the candidate," she said. Successful apprentices receive certification that shows they have achieved core competencies in public health care.

Cetronia Ambulance Corps, in South Whitehall, Pa., is using apprenticeships to address the region's shortage of emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics.

Cetronia worked with the Lehigh Valley Workforce Development Board and Pennsylvania CareerLink Lehigh Valley to launch Pennsylvania's first four-year EMT/paramedic apprenticeship program. The program can be replicated throughout the state.

The first two apprentices started in March 2016, according to Shawn McGovern, Cetronia's director of human resources. "We started with two to make sure we could properly manage it, to make sure it was good for us and for the people coming on board. Because it's new, we had to make sure we were doing things correctly."

The apprentices took classes, paid for by the state, through Lehigh Carbon Community College and the Emergency Medicine Institute at Lehigh Valley Hospital, two nights a week for six months, McGovern said. At the same time, they started in entry-level positions at Cetronia.

"We brought them in while they started school to get used to our culture. We could train them on a few things, such as how to safely operate vehicles and in soft skills like customer service," he said. "We started them from the ground up. It was a big help for us."

Once they received their Pennsylvania EMT licenses, they began work as EMTs at Cetronia. "It's an opportunity to grow with us. They can improve themselves, get better positions with the company and better pay obviously," McGovern said.

For Cetronia, the program is a good recruitment tool, he added. "It gets our name out there to people who are displaced from other industries who are interested in health care but never knew how to get into it."

Stephenie Overman is a freelance writer based in the Washington, D.C., area.

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