

# Guide to Investing in Frontline Health Care Workers



## Executive Summary

- Why Invest in Your Frontline Health Care Workforce?
- Employer Best Practices for Making Effective Investments
- A Framework for Integrating Workforce Investments with Business Impact
- Resources for Investing in Frontline Workers

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Frontline Workers Are Essential in Today's Changing Health Care Landscape

**Few U.S. industries have experienced as much change recently as health care. Approximately 20 million new consumers have health insurance coverage due to the Affordable Care Act. Care is shifting from the hospital to the home, clinic, and other community sites. Financing arrangements are shifting from payment for volume to payment for value. And providers at every point along the health care continuum must meet higher standards of quality or face financial penalties.**

Yet some things remain constant. Health care depends overwhelmingly on the human factor: on the judgments and relationships at the bedside, the operating room, the examining room, in-home care, or at registration and discharge. How individuals perform their jobs—and having the right people in the right roles—is pivotal to delivering quality care.

Health care employers are particularly dependent on workers at the front lines of care: support and technical staff who provide direct care to patients and/or support health care practitioners. Their ranks include nursing assistants, housekeepers, medical assistants, community health workers, dietary service workers, and a host of others who work 24/7 to answer call lights, empty bed pans, pass food trays, or take vital signs. These workers represent approximately 50 percent of the health care workforce, but their earnings are often low, with limited opportunities for mobility. Historically, these positions have been relatively easy for employers to fill. However, with many regions of the country reaching full employment, recruiting and retention are becoming increasingly difficult. While these workers are essential to delivering quality care, employers frequently underinvest in developing the talent of this workforce. But a growing number of employers realize that investing in their frontline workforce is critical to achieving today's imperatives for lowering costs, improving the quality of care, and achieving better population health outcomes.

## CareerSTAT

CareerSTAT is a network of health care leaders investing in the skills and careers of frontline workers. CareerSTAT's Frontline Health Care Worker Champion program recognizes organizations making significant investments in their frontline employees. The programs and policies of these 25 Champions and Emerging Champions have informed the findings and recommendations of this Guide.

## Who Are Frontline Health Care Workers?

Frontline health care workers provide routine and essential services in all settings, including hospitals, outpatient care, behavioral health, long term care and home health care. They represent 50% of the health care workforce and are responsible for a range of operations, including providing administrative, direct care, environmental, and technical services to patients, families, and caregivers. CareerSTAT focuses on those frontline positions that require less than a bachelor's degree and generally earn median incomes less than \$45,000 per year. For a full list of frontline occupations visit <http://www.nationalfund.org/initiatives/careerstat/who-are-frontline-workers/>.

# Why Invest in Your Frontline Health Care Workforce?

Health care employers across the country—and particularly those engaged in the CareerSTAT network—are investing in their frontline workers because they seek tangible results that contribute to the success of the organization, individual workers, and the broader community. Guided by the Triple Aim goals of improved patient experience, better overall population health, and reduced costs, employers are making the business case for their investments by aligning workforce training and education programs with strategic areas of business impact.

Each of the business problems or opportunities associated with the strategic impact areas can be addressed, in part, through frontline worker skill development or career advancement. Employers use specific metrics to gauge impacts and to determine if workforce programs generate the expected benefits. Results may be quantitative and measurable in terms of dollars saved in recruitment costs, reduced turnover, or preventable readmissions to the hospital. Or they may be qualitative—as when employees gain new competencies in caring for patients, or the working climate and team relationships on a unit become more collaborative.

## Areas of Strategic Business Impact

Employers cite six major areas where developing the frontline workforce can have strategic business impact



### Workforce Availability

Frontline staffing needs are addressed by filling vacancies, reducing turnover, decreasing overtime, and reducing temporary agency use.



### Employee Competency & Advancement

Employees gain the needed knowledge, skills, and abilities to deliver high quality care and advance their careers.



### Employee Engagement

Employees express greater satisfaction with their jobs and are more engaged in their work, resulting in improved performance outcomes and increased staff retention.



### Patient Experience

Patients and their families express higher levels of satisfaction with the quality of care received and services provided. Patient satisfaction scores improve.



### Community Impact

Organizations demonstrate greater positive impact in the communities they serve by hiring local residents, increasing workforce diversity, and improving health outcomes in the community.



### Quality & Safety

Organizations improve performance by expanding the role of frontline workers and enhancing their skills to reduce such measures as medical errors and avoidable re-hospitalizations.

# Employer Best Practices for Making Effective Investments

There is no “one-size-fits-all” model for health care providers to effectively invest in their frontline workforce, but there are both programmatic and organizational practices common to the most successful employer-based programs. Fundamentally, “best practice” employers—including CareerSTAT’s Frontline Health Care Worker Champions—view their frontline employees as critical assets that increase business impact and improve quality of care. The *CareerSTAT Guide to Investing in Frontline Health Care Workers* features CareerSTAT Champion organizations that employ a combination of programmatic and organizational best practices. Specific examples are provided to illustrate how each practice is implemented.

## Programmatic Best Practices

Programmatic best practices engage frontline workers directly in many forms of workforce training and education to expand talent pipelines and make learning and career advancement easily accessible.

### 1. Inclusive Hiring

- Recruit from the community
- Create an incumbent worker pipeline
- Provide structured onboarding of new hires

### 2. Accessible Learning

- Basic skills development
- Work-based learning
- Competency-based instruction
- Flexible learning options

### 3. Career Advancement

- Enhanced training to meet new performance standards
- Career exploration tools and opportunities
- Career coaching and counseling
- Career pathways

## Organizational Best Practices

At the highest level, organizational best practices ensure that the necessary infrastructure and support are in place so that workforce training and education programs have the greatest impact on both the business and individual workers.

### 1. Engaging Leaders

- Alignment with organizational priorities
- Senior leader support and sponsorship
- Managers as coaches and champions

### 2. Developing Infrastructure

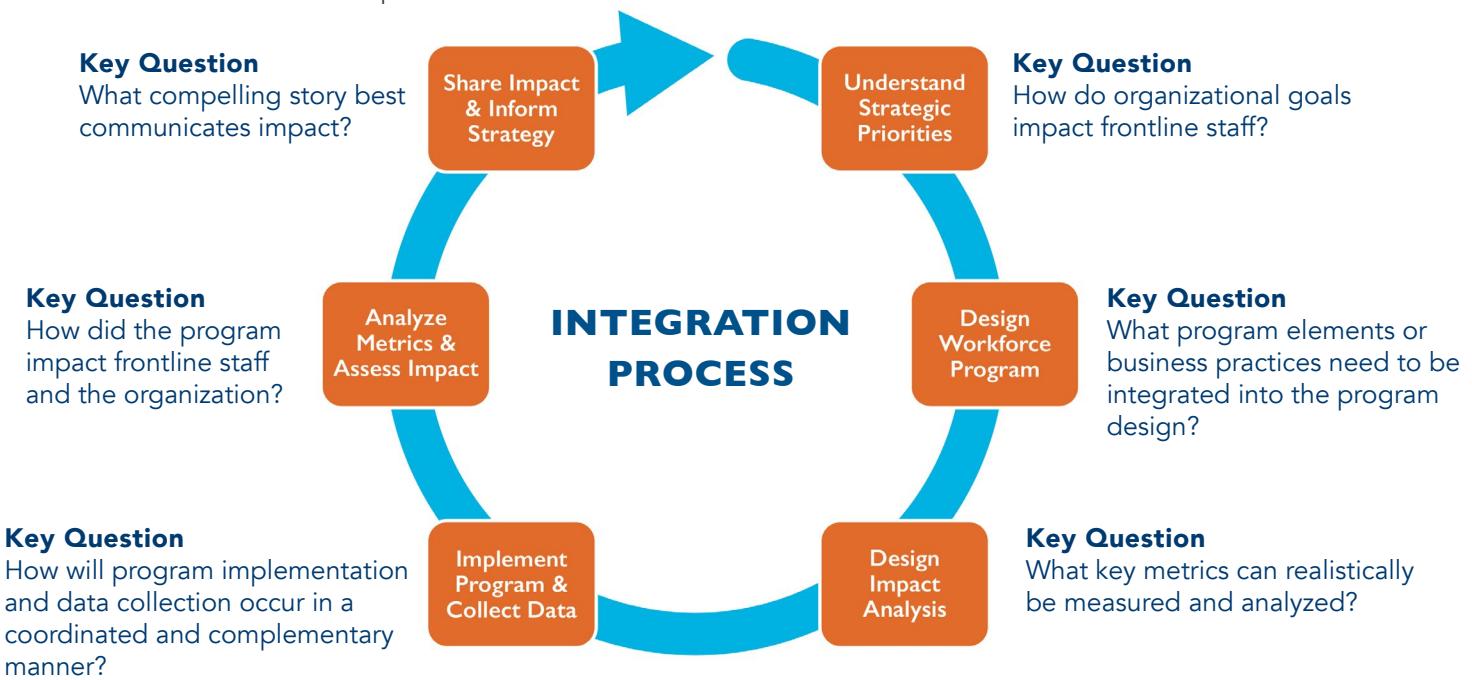
- Dedicated workforce units or staff
- Employee skill and educational assessments
- Supportive HR policies
- Workforce planning and analytics

### 3. Leveraging Resources

- Secure seed funding and develop co-investment strategies
- Form industry partnerships with other employers
- Leverage partner expertise and resources
- Integrate with business operations

# A Framework for Integrating Workforce Investments with Business Impact

Integrating workforce investments with analysis of business impact is essential to making the business case—not only to generate good evidence, but also to ensure that programs are sustainable. CareerSTAT offers a simple framework that integrates organizational priorities with program design and business impact analysis. Informed by the experience of employers in the CareerSTAT network, the framework offers guidance to organizations and practitioners as they determine which practices to implement and develop a plan to collect data and measure impact.



The degree to which employers integrate their workforce programs with organizational priorities and business impact analysis exists along a continuum, from low or no integration to high, fully integrated approaches. The level of integration is often associated with program sustainability and organizational investments. Generally speaking, all levels along the continuum integrate some best practices, while employers engaged in the highest level of integration most likely have adopted a comprehensive array of both programmatic and organizational practices. Regardless of where their efforts fall along the continuum, employer intentions are often the same—making effective investments that advance the skills and careers of frontline workers while at the same time generating positive business outcomes.

## CONTINUUM OF INTEGRATION



## Call to Action

Health care employers across the country are investing in the skills and career development of their frontline workers and seeing results. Join the CareerSTAT network of health care leaders in their efforts to increase organizational investments and accelerate the adoption of employer practices so that more frontline workers have access to skill development and advancement opportunities. Here's what you can do:

- Make the business case for investing in frontline employees in your own organization. Align workforce programs to strategic organizational priorities and use key metrics to show the returns such investments can produce.
- Adopt a combination of programmatic and organizational workforce development practices in a manner that supports strategic priorities and demonstrates commitment to developing the talent of frontline workers.
- Integrate the measurement of frontline investments into the design and implementation of workforce programs to demonstrate impact and increase the likelihood of sustainability.

CareerSTAT invites you to join the discussion, share your stories, and use our resources. Visit [www.nationalfund.org/initiatives/careerstat/join-the-network/](http://www.nationalfund.org/initiatives/careerstat/join-the-network/) to learn more.

## About the Guide

The *CareerSTAT Guide to Investing in Frontline Health Care Worker* provides employers with strategies and a framework for making effective investments in frontline worker skills and career development that increase business impact and provides workers with opportunities for advancement toward family-sustaining incomes. The Guide explains why health care employers invest in their frontline workforce and offers metrics to make the business case for investment. Drawing specific examples from CareerSTAT's 25 Frontline Health Care Worker Champion organizations, the Guide highlights best practices that demonstrate how employers successfully implement workforce development programs and maintain organizational infrastructure to provide sustained support for frontline skill development and career advancement. Finally, the Guide offers a framework for selecting programs, developing a business impact analysis, and sustaining the programs through use of data and evidence. The CareerSTAT Guide includes five companion documents:

- [Why Invest in Your Frontline Health Care Workforce?](#)
- [Employer Best Practices for Making Effective Investments](#)
- [A Framework for Integrating Workforce Investments with Business Impact](#)
- [Resources for Investing in Frontline Workers](#)

The Guide's target audience is health care leaders who are developing frontline worker programs and building the business case for organizational investment. The Guide provides a framework for conceiving and implementing a business impact analysis. It is directed to health care executives, human resource and workforce development leaders and staff, learning officers, administrators, and patient-care leaders.

Please note that this Guide is not a step-by-step manual for performing business impact analysis or measuring return on investment in training programs. Those needing technical guidance in performing business impact analysis are referred to links to specific tools and publications in the Guide's "Resources for Investing in Frontline Workers" section.

## Frontline Health Care Worker Champions

CareerSTAT's Frontline Health Care Worker Champions are recognized by their peers for their sustained investment in skill and career development of frontline workers. Representing health care organizations across the care continuum, these industry leaders are improving health outcomes for patients and increasing their business impact by making learning and advancement more accessible for their frontline employees. Since 2014, CareerSTAT has recognized 25 organizations. Their practices, policies and strategic approach inform the CareerSTAT Guide, best practices, and resources. Learn more about the Frontline Health Care Worker Champion program at <http://www.nationalfund.org/initiatives/careerstat/frontline-health-care-champions/>.

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CareerSTAT is a network of health care leaders promoting investment in the skills and careers of frontline workers. It supports health care organizations in using workforce development programs to increase business impact, improve health outcomes, and provide good jobs. CareerSTAT produces an array of resources on the benefits of skill and career development, recognizes organizations leading the industry as Frontline Health Care Worker Champions, and tracks innovative practices for advancing frontline workers. CareerSTAT is an initiative of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions and Jobs for the Future and is generously supported by The Joyce Foundation. To learn more about CareerSTAT, visit:

<http://www.nationalfund.org/careerstat>

**Jobs for the Future** develops, implements, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In more than 200 communities across 43 states, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers.

## The Joyce Foundation

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**The National Fund for Workforce Solutions** is a national network promoting economic opportunity and prosperous communities through investment and innovation. Based in Washington D.C., the National Fund partners with philanthropy, employers, workers, public and private community organizations, and more than 30 regional collaboratives to invest in skills, improve systems, and generate good jobs. The National Fund supports civic and business leaders in promoting evidence-based practices and policies that build shared prosperity. Learn more about the National Fund and its local partners at [www.nationalfund.org](http://www.nationalfund.org).

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TEL 202.223.8994

CareerSTAT and National Fund for Workforce Solutions  
1730 Rhode Island Ave NW #712, Washington, DC 20036

[WWW.NATIONALFUND.ORG](http://WWW.NATIONALFUND.ORG)



**JOB S FOR THE FUTURE**

TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 [info@jff.org](mailto:info@jff.org)

88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110 (HQ)  
122 C Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20001  
505 14th Street, Suite 340, Oakland, CA 94612

[WWW.JFF.ORG](http://WWW.JFF.ORG)