

Apprenticeships: A solution to rising demand for skilled healthcare workers

Written by Kelly Aiken, Vice President of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions | September 11, 2017 | [Print](#) | [Email](#)

Healthcare workers are in high-demand across the country, and employers are struggling to both retain employees and meet a [widening skills gap](#) within the industry.

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Compounding rising demand for talent, there is a nationwide call for healthcare employers to diversify their workforce and help their workers grow and prosper.

CareerSTAT, the [National Fund for Workforce Solutions](#)' effort to advance healthcare's frontline workers, has been working with healthcare organizations across the country to bridge the industry's skills gap, and has set out to find an answer for the resonating question: How can healthcare organizations meet the demand for skilled and credentialed talent?

It's no surprise that for many healthcare organizations, including [Mercy Health](#) in western Michigan, apprenticeships are helping them meet their staffing needs. According to recent statistics from the [United States Department of Labor](#), in FY 2016 more than 206,000 individuals nationwide entered the apprenticeship system. Even more importantly, there are over 505,000 apprentices currently obtaining the skills they need to succeed while earning a wage to support themselves and their families. While the healthcare industry has a long history of integrating work-based learning into their education and training models, employers across the continuum of care are embracing the apprenticeship model.

Mercy Health, a regional health ministry of Trinity Health, is a regional partnership of hospitals and healthcare providers throughout Western Michigan. As one of the largest health systems in the region, it is a multi-campus healthcare provider with 700 hospital beds and over 8,600 total employees, including 400 physicians and nearly 3,000 frontline workers. The Mercy Health system uses a range of practices, documented in a recent [case study](#), to hire and engage employees. These innovative programs include evidence-based hiring practices to build a diverse talent pipeline and extensive workforce investments to advance its frontline workers.

In 2013, the shortage of Medical Assistants (MAs) in the western Michigan area became apparent to Mercy Health's senior leadership. Physicians were calling for a solution to fix the shortage, and on top of that, Medicare and Medicaid had made a nationwide request that MAs become certified. As a result, in 2015, Mercy Health developed and launched a U.S. Department of Labor-registered MA apprenticeship program with three community college partners from the region. The apprenticeship program focuses on creating a pipeline of MAs with the necessary competencies and certification by recruiting underserved community members who may have multiple barriers to employment or lack the resources to pursue a college education.

Unlike the standard MA education and clinical training model, the apprenticeship model gives individuals the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills and immediately apply what they learn in the classroom to the workplace. As employees of Mercy Health, apprentices earn a paycheck and receive benefits throughout the 11 month program. The program balances the employee's time between school and work by having them program spend two days a week in class and three paid, eight-hour days working in a physician's

office. As their competency level increases and they advance through the apprenticeship program, they also receive regular wage increases. Upon completion of the program, apprentices are eligible to sit for the Certified Medical Assistant or Registered Medical Assistant exams. Their apprenticeship also equates to one year of workplace experience so when permanently hired they receive a higher wage than typical new graduates.

By working together, all the partners enabled the apprentices to complete the program with little to no debt. For example, the first cohort of apprentices had 70 percent of tuition covered by grants, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding, and scholarships. Mercy Health covered the remaining 30 percent using funding from their tuition assistance program.

As a result of their efforts, Mercy Health has built a workforce development program that is mutually beneficial for employers and employees. Mercy Health has built a consistent pipeline of highly-skilled Medical Assistants, a position that is critical to providing high-quality and affordable care. Furthermore, since Mercy Health is recruiting often underserved individuals in the community, it is building a workforce that reflects the entire community, which results in stronger community relationships and often better community health. Above serving the community and its workers, this development strategy delivers a strong return on investment. Retention rates for MA apprentices are higher and graduates are staying longer than their counterparts. With the average cost of turnover estimated to be \$26,769, investment in MA apprentices are expected to lower turnover and result in overall savings.

CareerSTAT has analyzed the talent development efforts of dozens of healthcare organizations and records a significant link between workforce investment and employee turnover, engagement and performance. For example, nurses that were trained through a Louisville hospital's internal development program were 20 percent more likely to be retained than new nursing graduates and 44 percent more likely than nurses hired from another organization. For an industry facing painful shortages of both entry-level workers and licensed professionals, a culture of engagement and loyalty are critical to long-term success.

The apprenticeship model is a time-tested solution that works for employees and employers: workers earn a wage while preparing for a new career and companies build a reliable, highly-trained workforce for key positions. Despite being a successful training model, healthcare organizations seeking to create and launch apprenticeship programs face unique challenges such as managing staffing levels and navigating state and federal licensing requirements. The National Fund for Workforce Solutions, CareerSTAT and its partners, including [H-CAP](#) and [Hope Street](#) are helping healthcare organizations develop their workforce through proven training models such as apprenticeships. Learn more at: www.nationalfund.org/CareerSTAT.

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