

CareerSTAT

FRONTLINE WORKER CHAMPION

 **National Fund**
for Workforce Solutions



UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT HEALTH NETWORK

BURLINGTON, VERMONT

University of Vermont (UVM) Health Network is an integrated nonprofit academic health system of six hospitals and a home health and hospice organization. UVM Health Network serves more than 1 million people living in rural communities across Vermont and northern New York.



Addressing Labor Shortfalls

There were simply not enough available workers in the communities served by UVM Health Network to meet the needs of its aging patient population. That reality forced the organization to invest in expensive temporary labor like traveling nurses to fill gaps in patient care delivery.

The health system's leadership knew the organization could not sustain persistent worker shortfalls and the growing expense of traveling labor.

The effort to rectify the situation started several years ago with strategies to keep current staff on board. Through multiple listening sessions, the leadership team heard challenges and opportunities directly from workers. One key takeaway: Employees — especially frontline workers — wanted opportunities to advance their careers in ways that would also benefit their patients.

“We asked employees what was holding them back and what they needed to continue their career,” says Jerry Baake, director of workforce development. “I

see my role as a workforce supply chain professional, where we're trying to match supply with demand.”

Those same insights also drove recruitment efforts, because jobseekers were drawn to UVM Health Network's advertised opportunities for advancement.

Combined improvements in recruitment and retention decreased the health system's reliance on traveling nurses and saved the organization over \$1 million.

Reinvesting in the Frontline

UVM Health Network also strives to help workers maintain daily work and personal responsibilities while pursuing education and career advancement. Baake had to make sure workers could actually participate in new career pathway programs for aspiring nurses, respiratory therapists, and surgical technicians. To this end, employees receive protected time to learn while at work; financial support for tuition and textbooks; and help with reducing debt through service commitments.

“In certain instances, we've made it so people can learn while they earn, with paid study hours,” Baake says. “You study at work, which helps balance work, education, and family responsibilities.”

The investment provides a big payoff, for workers and the organization alike. The experience of Jessica Fessette, of Plattsburgh, New York, shows just how much.



Impact STAT

UVM Health Network has already saved more than **\$1 million** in expenses on traveling nurses thanks to its workforce development programs.

Before taking a job at UVM Health Network 13 years ago, Fessette worked at McDonald's and Dollar Tree, positions that offered little in the way of career growth. After she started working in the hospital kitchen, she enrolled in several on-the-job training programs. After completing two certificate training programs, Fessette transitioned to new roles in patient care and medical records. Now she's in a program that pays for study hours while she earns an associate degree and a surgical technician certificate. As a union member, these accomplishments will net Fessette an hourly wage bump and the ability to make more money over time.

"I'm a big supporter of programs like this that keep internal talent by promoting from the inside," Fessette says. "We are people who deserve good things in life. Because of this job, I now see the opportunity to buy a house in my future."

Adapting to Changing Demographics

UVM Health Network serves areas with a growing refugee, immigrant, and asylee resettlement population, with representation from some 40 countries. It also serves a northern New York community with a significant Indigenous population.

To reduce barriers to employment and create more opportunities for career advancement, the health system invests in multiple English language programs for some 175 employees and counting.



Jessica Fessette

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Jessica Fessette

OR Technician in Training, UVM

Xi Chen is one beneficiary. She settled in Vermont after fleeing Burundi, a nation in crisis. Despite arriving without knowing English, Chen eventually landed a job as a cleaner at a UVM Health Network hospital. She then signed up for English language training programs, earning a licensed nurse assistant certification. Now she's enrolled in a registered nurse program, a partnership with a local university.

“I have a strong desire and a calling to be a caregiver,” Chen says. “And I’m able to do that and provide for myself because of the support I get from our leaders and my co-workers.”

UVM Health Network is also tackling a systemic issue facing many communities: housing. To address the region’s lack of affordable housing, the health system partnered with developers to construct housing and provide childcare access for nearly 200 frontline workers. This significant investment aims to positively impact the organization, its workers, and the surrounding community.



Xi Chen

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Xi Chen

Licensed Nurse Assistant, UVM



CareerSTAT is a healthcare sector strategy of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions rooted in the power of peer-learning. Through a national network, members share workforce development innovation, best practices, and outcome-based initiatives to support frontline healthcare workers to build skills and careers to achieve family-sustaining wages.

