

Jobs to Careers

*Transforming the Front Lines
of Health Care*

The Resource Within: Today's Employees Become Hospitals' Workforce of the Future

By David Altstadt

January 2011

When Baltimore's Good Samaritan Hospital decided to improve the skills of frontline workers, says Larry Beck, the hospital's president from 1994 to 2009, "frontline workers respond very positively." Job retention rose; even more important, "the quality of care and patient satisfaction improved."

*Part of a series of reports
on work-based learning in
specific subsectors of the
health care workforce.*



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JOB'S FOR THE FUTURE

As America's hospitals strive to meet the rising demand for affordable, high-quality, cost-effective care, one of the central issues they will have to resolve concerns the workforce. As articulated by the American Hospital Association, what health care faces is actually a twin challenge: attracting and retaining replacements for retiring workers, while expanding its workforce to care for an aging population (AHA 2010). On top of that, health care reform promises to bring into the system millions of Americans seeking care on a more regular basis.

If current trends persist, there will be shortages of 109,600 physicians by 2020 and 260,000 registered nurses by 2025 (AHA 2010). To address the tight labor market, the hospital association is exploring strategies to redesign work, retain existing workers, and attract a new generation of workers. **But to deliver care to an ever-increasing number of patients, and to make that care more patient-centered, hospitals must focus on the careers and skills development of all members of the existing workforce, not just doctors and other high-level professionals.**

In particular, hospitals can expect to hire additional:

- Medical assistants and staff in other allied health occupations;
- Patient care technicians;
- Unit clerks;
- Nursing assistants and physical therapy assistants;
- Staff skilled in information technology to handle the transition to electronic medical records and manage and code health records in clinical settings; and
- Staff who can deliver culturally appropriate care and services and speak the languages of growing, diverse populations in the United States (Wilson 2010).

To meet these needs, hospitals should seek ways to better train and retain the women and men who work on the front lines of care and service delivery. Since 2006, the *Jobs to Careers: Transforming the Front Lines of Health Care* initiative has helped hospitals respond to this challenge with a "grow your own" workforce solution.

The *Jobs to Careers* Model: Focus on the Front Lines

Frontline workers fill about half of all health care jobs, and they deliver most of the nation's direct patient care and public health services. However, much of their potential for delivering more and better care and filling critical vacancies in professional positions goes untapped.

Most frontline workers are women earning \$40,000 or less per year, and they tend to have education credentials that end with a high school diploma. Few frontline workers are licensed to practice independently, and they receive little or no training for their work beyond brief in-service sessions and on-the-job guidance in day-to-day tasks. Moreover, they lack the support needed to ensure—let alone improve—quality service and patient care. Too often, the result for frontline workers is low morale and high turnover, rather than realizing their essential role in helping hospitals deliver acute care.

Through *Jobs to Careers*, hospitals partner with education institutions and other community organizations to change the way frontline employees are trained, rewarded, and advanced. These partnerships develop career paths and make them easily available to frontline employees.

A hallmark of this national initiative is work-based learning: frontline employees master occupational and academic skills in the course of completing their job tasks and fulfilling their day-to-day responsibilities. While working full time, the employees access college and earn academic credit for workplace training. Other learning approaches in *Jobs to Careers* include technology-enabled and experience-based learning, as well as traditional learning conducted at both the worksite and educational institutions.

To realize the unique *Jobs to Careers* approach to learning, employers and educators reform their own operations to better recognize the needs of working adults and to improve access to and success in skill-building programs:

- *At the workplace*, employers develop new job positions and responsibilities; deeply involve supervisors in employee training and career development; and offer paid release time, pre-paid tuition assistance, job coaching, and mentoring.
- *At the educational institution*, community colleges and other educational institutions provide college credit for work-based learning, prior learning, and entry-level health care credentials; offer accelerated and part-time degree and certificate programs; contextualize college preparatory math and English courses to health care concepts and job tasks; and appoint professional staff from health care employers to be adjunct college faculty.

Through *Jobs to Careers*, frontline employees build skills and expand their knowledge in ways that are critical to doing their jobs well. In turn, they receive financial rewards and qualify for advancement to new positions. Hospitals build and retain employees who are talented and committed, and they bolster a workplace culture that supports professional development, mentorship, and collaboration. Patients receive better care and services, delivered by a high-quality workforce.

Examples from the Field

Several acute care hospitals have participated in *Jobs to Careers* through grants awarded to Asante Health System (Oregon), the Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare (Maryland), Humility of Mary Health Partners (Ohio), Mississippi Hospital Association (Mississippi), Northern Arizona University (Arizona), Owensboro Technical & Community College (Kentucky), Workforce Solutions (Texas), and Virginia Mason Medical Center (Washington State).

ARIZONA Serving Native-American communities

Frontline workers targeted for training

- Frontline hospital workers

Outcomes

- 16 students from Chinle and Winslow have completed a total of 60 degree-related college classes since spring 2008.
- Several Chinle workers have received promotions and salary increases to become health technicians.
- At least 3 Winslow workers have passed the registered nurse licensing exam, qualifying them for promotions and salary increases.

Two hospital systems serving the Navajo Nation teamed up with Northern Arizona University to advance the career opportunities of frontline staff in the fields of public health and nursing. The three-year *Jobs to Careers* project, from 2006 to 2009, incorporated the Native-American tradition of “learning circles” to stress bottom-up decision making and teamwork in the development and delivery of work-based learning.

Chinle Comprehensive Care Facility serves the primary care needs of the Navajo Nation, in addition to a range of public health, preventative, and Native medical services.

Chinle worked with Northern Arizona University to train frontline hospital staff to move into public health as health technicians. The project adopted the leaning circles tradition to involve frontline workers and their supervisors in identifying the competencies that workers needed to in order to perform technician jobs.

To avoid long commutes to the college campus, located in Flagstaff, workers received instruction through online tutorials and videoconferencing. Workers also completed work-based learning projects to demonstrate their competencies through work experience in lieu of taking additional college courses. Northern Arizona University awarded three college credits for program completion. Operating under the tight regulations of the Indian Health Service, Chinle was able to push through changes in job codes in order to create permanent career-track positions and eight apprenticeship positions, which provide flexibility for work-based learning.

Northern Arizona University also partnered with Winslow Indian Health Care Center, which delivers urgent care and other outpatient services to the Navajo Nation. Winslow had expected to train frontline workers for health technician positions through the project but ultimately focused on a more pressing need: helping workers pass the national licensing exam to become registered nurses. Several of its employees had graduated from nursing degree programs yet worked in low-wage frontline jobs because they had failed the exam. Northern Arizona University set up a tutoring program that embraced the learning circles tradition of teamwork. Workers took part in group study sessions and received instruction in addressing test anxiety and stress in general. They also received tutoring, individualized assessments of academic remediation needs, and mentoring on study skills and managing personal life issues. Many eventually passed the exam and were promoted to registered nurses.

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Training staff for patient care positions

Frontline workers targeted for training

- Frontline workers on a clinical path leading to jobs as clinical technicians
- Frontline workers on a clerical path leading to jobs as patient access representatives

Outcomes

- 48 workers enrolled in *Jobs to Careers* at 5 hospitals in 2 hospital systems: 37 on a clinical assistant/patient care technician track and 11 on a patient access representative track.
- 21 participants earned a Basic Clinical Technician certificate; 8 of those completed the requirements for an Advanced Clinical Technician certificate.
- 28 clinical assistant/patient care technician and 11 patient access representative participants completed a transitions-to-college course.
- 10 clinical assistant/patient care technician and 6 patient access representative participants completed the medical terminology course.
- 10 of the patient access representative participants enrolled in the National Association of Healthcare Access Management course review.



Frontline employees of University of Maryland Specialty Hospital graduated from Baltimore's *Jobs to Careers* program to become certified nursing assistants and patient care technicians.

Workforce Solutions—Capital Area Workforce Board collaborated with Seton Family of Hospitals, Saint David's Healthcare, Austin Community College, and other partners to prepare frontline workers for two career paths:

- A clinical path leading to jobs as clinical technicians; and
- A clerical path leading to jobs as patient access representatives.

A cornerstone of the project was the development of 11 work-based learning modules. Without leaving the workplace, workers could use these modules as opportunities to build, practice, and demonstrate their mastery of the skills

needed to achieve certification. Workers pursuing the clinical technician career path received clinical skills training in phlebotomy and aseptic technique. Those in the patient access representative career path were trained on customer service and financial services policies.

Austin Community College awarded college credit to workers for competencies they mastered through both prior learning and work-based learning. The workers also enrolled in college courses on medical terminology and college success and received academic counseling. Hospital staff acting as job coaches also received training.

A number of frontline workers and job coaches have reported renewed enthusiasm for their jobs, improved self-confidence, and new personal goals for education and career advancement. Due to their involvement in *Jobs to Careers*, some workers have gone on to enroll in higher education, such as the community college's nursing degree program. Through its participation in the project, the community college now has a model for awarding credit to students for prior learning and work-based learning.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

A collaboration among hospitals to address the demand for direct care workers

Frontline workers targeted for training

- Non-clinical staff, including dietary, transportation, and environmental services workers
- Nurse assistants

Outcomes

- 55 frontline workers enrolled in nurse assistant training; 48 completed the program and became certified nurse assistants.
- 48 workers enrolled in nurse-extender training; 34 completed the program and became nurse extenders, taking on such tasks as delivering meals, transporting patients, taking vital signs, and performing other patient care tasks.

To train frontline workers to fill a shortage in direct care workers, Good Samaritan Hospital, University of Maryland Specialty Hospital, Community College of Baltimore County, and other partners collaborated with the Baltimore Alliance for Healthcare Careers—BACH—a nonprofit that brings together local agencies, health care institutions, and other organizations to create opportunities for residents to pursue careers in health professions. The work-based learning program prepared non-clinical staff to become certified nursing assistants. The CNAs then completed additional training and internships to become nurse extenders (also known as patient care technicians), raising their hourly wages about \$4, to an average of \$13.

Both segments of the program consisted of classroom instruction for eight hours a week during work time. Participants also spent time on the hospital floor shadowing nurses and completing work tasks so they could experience first hand what is involved in direct care. Workers who did not initially meet the prerequisite skill levels for the program participated in a hospital-based academic bridge course to increase their reading comprehension.

BACH also mapped career ladders in five hospitals, illustrating how lower-skilled workers can advance to higher-paying jobs. As a strategy for retaining staff and helping them advance, employers and foundation members of this partnership pooled efforts to support and scale up career coaching for hospital workers, and they offered professional development for coaches. Nearly 600 workers across six hospitals received coaching services.

JACKSON AND MCCOMB, MISSISSIPPI

Building the skills of administrative staff

The Mississippi Office of Nursing Workforce and the Mississippi Hospital Association are collaborating with health care providers and colleges in Jackson and



Ramie Polk, nurse manager, and Kelly Blackmon, unit secretary at Central Mississippi Medical Center. Blackmon was a transporter prior to becoming a unit secretary. The medical center partnered with Hinds Community College to develop curriculum for the unit secretary position.

Frontline workers targeted for training

- Non-clinical staff, including dietary, transportation, and environmental services workers

Outcomes

- 50 workers received training or are in training.
- Jackson: 7 workers earned college credit and a certificate; 6 workers were promoted to unit clerk positions.
- McComb: 35 workers completed job readiness training as a layoff aversion strategy.

McComb to grow the skills of frontline workers. In Jackson, the Central Mississippi Medical Center and Hines Community College are training non-clinical frontline staff for unit clerk positions. In McComb, Southwest Mississippi Regional Center and Southwest Community College are focusing on averting layoffs during tough economic times. The project is training frontline employees on a range of job readiness skills that could help them move to new positions within the hospital in the event that their current positions are eliminated.

MEDFORD, OREGON

Meeting the need for staff skilled in information technology

Frontline workers targeted for training

- Frontline workers in general

Outcomes

- 25 frontline employees received training.
- 15 completed the program and earned a certificate of completion toward becoming health care informatics assistants.
- 7 (estimate) received pay increases due to promotions or higher pay rates for informatics tasks.

In Medford, Oregon, Asante Health System partnered with Rogue Community College in training frontline workers to support the

rapidly changing information technology environment of the health care workplace, including electronic medical records.

Asante and Rogue developed a 50-credit health care informatics program, which workers completed online and in courses offered at the workplace and on campus. Courses covered clinical and technology content, such as anatomy and physiology, database management, operating systems, medical records, and medical terminology. The program resulted in a certificate of completion, which can articulate to an Associate's in Applied Science degree.

Participants received two days of paid educational release time each week. They used the time to attend classes at Rogue Community College, study, or participate in work-based learning activities at Asante. They had opportunities to job shadow and received support from a college guidance counselor and from supervisors acting as job coaches, mentors, and preceptors for the work-based learning component of the training program. Workers who did not meet the prerequisite skill levels participated in remedial coursework—typically in lower-level math, writing, and computers—before entering the program.

Some workers were promoted to a new full-time position in health care informatics. Others earned a higher rate of pay when performing informatics-related activities on-the-job. Asante has retained nearly every worker who enrolled in the program.

OWENSBORO, KENTUCKY

A hospital system focused on addressing a nurse shortage

Over the past decade, the Owensboro, Kentucky, region has faced a rising demand for health care, a severe shortage of trained nursing staff, and a lack of training programs to fill those vacancies. Through *Jobs to Careers*, Owensboro Medical Health System and Owensboro Community & Technical College partnered to develop and launch OCTC@OMHS and put frontline workers on the path to becoming nurses.



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Frontline workers targeted for training

- Nurse aides
- Pharmacy technicians
- Unit clerks
- Medical receptionists
- Patient care representatives
- Counselors

Outcomes

- 75 workers enrolled in the program.
- 65 workers obtained a certified nursing assistant certification.
- 56 workers are on track to earn Associate's Degrees in Nursing and become registered nurses.
- 13 workers have obtained Associate's degrees, and another 10 are expected to graduate by the end of 2010.

OCTC@OMHS compresses the length and supplements the curriculum of the college's part-time nursing degree program to accommodate the work schedules and skill deficits of frontline workers at the hospital system. The program enables OMHS to grow its own workforce and meet an urgent need for more registered nurses. Frontline staff in OCTC@OMHS can continue working full time and still attain an Associate's Degree in Nursing in three years. They take two to three semesters of general courses, depending on their academic backgrounds and basic educational levels as assessed upon entry into the program. Then they enter two semesters of nursing courses, followed by a year or more of technical training in nursing practicum. Several courses are offered at the hospital or online.

The hospital reimburses students for tuition costs and allows them eight hours per pay period (four hours per week) of paid educational release time to either attend classes or, when class is not in session, to study and review material. Students also receive intensive coaching and case management to identify academic and life barriers that might interrupt progress toward degrees. Moreover, after determining

that many workers had weak math skills, the college and hospital staff collaborated to refocus an introductory math course around health care concepts relevant to workers' job experiences, a strategy known as contextualized learning.

Retention rates in OCTC@OMHS have ranged from 75 percent to 89 percent, comparable to or exceeding national retention rates in nursing programs, despite the barriers that entry-level workers face. Seventy-five percent of all enrollees are expected to earn an RN credential.

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Preparing medical assistants

Frontline workers targeted for training

- Customer service representatives

Outcomes

- 29 workers received or are in training for medical assisting.
- 2 workers have become certified medical assistants and received pay increases.
- Other participants have gone on to enter Associate's and Bachelor's degree programs to advance their careers.

Virginia Mason Medical Center is training customer service representatives at several of its ambulatory clinics to become medical assistants. Through a partnership with Renton Technical College, customer service representatives receive college credit for skills they hold in common with medical assistants, including CPR and telephone-based customer service.

Workers receive paid release time to attend classes on campus. Virginia Mason is developing a three-tiered career ladder for medical assistants, taking workers through the certification exam, to the completion of additional courses in leadership and patient safety, and then participation in an externship. The career pathway leads to salary increases. Current medical assistants are hired as instructors in the program.



A representative of Renton Technical College congratulates a former customer service representative at Virginia Mason Medical Center who graduated from *Jobs to Careers* to become a medical assistant.

YOUNGSTOWN, WARREN, AND BOARDMAN, OHIO

Training workers for patient care positions

Frontline workers targeted for training

- Non-clinical staff, including dietary, transportation, and environmental services workers
- Incumbent health care associates and unit clerks

Outcomes

- 25 frontline employees received training or are in training in patient care; 23 have been promoted to health care associate or unit clerk; 10 have received additional training and have advanced to Level II positions.
- 40 health care associates and unit clerks have received additional training; 20 have advanced to Level II positions.

Humility of Mary Health Partners teams up with career technical education centers and adult basic education providers to prepare frontline workers for patient care positions in its hospitals in Youngstown, Warren, and Boardman, Ohio. Employees from environmental, dietary, and patient transport departments receive training to become health care associates or unit clerks. They take courses in medical terminology and anatomy and physiology, followed by 10 weeks of work-based learning in clinical competencies and departmental operations. Work-based learning is delivered through participation in patient rounds with learning coaches and preceptors.

Workers needing to upgrade their academic skills can enroll in an on-site medical readiness course, which infuses health care concepts into adult basic education curricula. Program completers obtain an acute care apprentice certificate; unit clerks also receive an industry-recognized credential. In addition, current health care associates and unit clerks can enroll in training to advance to newly established Level II positions, which come with higher pay.

Jobs to Careers is a \$15.8 million initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Hitachi Foundation, with additional support from the U.S. Department of Labor. Jobs for the Future manages the initiative. Seventeen partnerships representing hospitals, community health centers, long-term care, and behavioral health have been supported by *Jobs to Careers*. These partnerships have trained more than 725 frontline workers. For more information, visit www.jobs2careers.org.

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Next Steps

Since 2006, *Jobs to Careers* has demonstrated what works—and what is needed—for transforming the skills and careers of frontline workers. Hospitals can take the following steps to benefit from and contribute to successful practices going forward:

- **EDUCATE.** Learn more about *Jobs to Careers*. Practice briefs, research reports, tools, and other resources on what makes for a successful work-based learning program are available at www.jobs2careers.org.
- **PARTICIPATE.** Join Jobs for the Future's *Health Care Affinity Group*, a virtual network for those interested in facilitating the advancement of new and incumbent low-wage workers across the health care sector. To sign up, email gausick@jff.org.
- **REPLICATE.** Talk with potential education and workforce development partners and funders in your community about establishing work-based learning programs and implementing other successful components of the *Jobs to Careers* model.
- **ADVOCATE.** Join other health care providers, education partners, funders, and other stakeholders in advocating for state and federal investments and policy reforms that will promote the adoption of work-based learning and other components of the *Jobs to Careers* model.

Jobs to Careers projects provide a foundation for creating and scaling up innovative and effective work-based learning models at hospitals and other health care institutions. But given the size and complexity of the health care sector, advancing the frontline workforce will require serious investments—of funds and other resources and in the attention and commitment of policymakers and stakeholders. To move a "health care workforce agenda" forward, Jobs for the Future has recommended a number of goals

for improving state and federal policies, such as:

- Improve the understanding of trends in the frontline health care workforce through dedicated funding for local, state, and national data collection, analysis, and dissemination.
- Ensure that knowledge about the frontline health care workforce reflects current and projected labor market information on trends in supply, demand, skill needs, skill gaps, employment, and earnings.
- Identify, evaluate, disseminate, and replicate best-practice models of health care workforce development to employers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders.
- Provide federal matching funds to state and local governments, private employers, and labor-management partnerships that invest in the recruitment, retention, and training of frontline and mid-level health care workers in the public and the private workforce.

For more information on the role of public policy in advancing the frontline workforce in health care, see *Rx for the Health Care Workforce: Promising Practices and Their Implications for State and Federal Policy*, by Randall Wilson.