



Staffing Effort Is Education-Driven

Some Massachusetts providers are training their own frontline caregivers by forming joint ventures with universities and community colleges.

HERITAGE HALL, WITH ITS FOUR buildings spread across a campus-like setting, could be just another complex of college buildings near the Connecticut River in rural western Massachusetts.

On any given day, one might see nursing students from the nearby state flagship school, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (UMass), going into and out of the Heritage buildings. Visitors here in September might have seen the graduation ceremony when 81 candidates were recognized for their educational achievements. And this month, Holyoke Community College will begin conducting satellite classes here to turn out certified nurse assistants (CNAs), as well as to enable current CNAs to advance to the “next rung” as licensed practical nurses (LPNs).

Yet Heritage is anything but a college campus. It is a complex of four buildings that together provide skilled nursing and specialized care for individuals who are elderly or have disabilities. It is decidedly more nursing facility than nursing school.

Onsite Graduate Training

But it is a nursing facility with a strong and growing educational component. The nursing students from UMass, for example, are training at Heritage in a joint venture program devised two years ago by Eleanor Vanetzian, graduate program director and director for the Office of Nursing Scholarships at UMass School of Nursing. The idea was to expose students who were already registered nurses (RNs) to

eight hours of observation in long term care.

“At first, I really worried that [the RNs] might be negative about long term care because this was not part of what they thought they should be doing in their nursing education,”

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Vanetzian says. “When Heritage employees came in to talk to my students, they were so positive that you could sense these students starting to change their view. Even some of my students who really want to work with children came out of the experience with a very different view, and some are considering working in long term care now.”

Increasingly, long term care providers are taking the issue of their labor forces into their own hands, becoming more creative as demand for workers continues to lag behind supply.

Growing Trend

The campus feeling around Heritage is still novel, but if administrators and educators have anything to say about it, the joint ventures that have begun

cropping up at long term care facilities like Heritage could well become a common feature at skilled nursing facilities throughout Massachusetts as providers seek to attract nursing students, CNA trainees, and others to the field of long term care.

“Even in a higher unemployment economy, we are challenged to maintain a steady and trained workforce,” says Ned Morse, president of the Massachusetts Extended Care Federation (MECF). “What Heritage and quite a few other providers in Massachusetts are doing is building a new model for labor development that is less reliant on the open market and more do-it-yourself. What we are doing, in many respects, is growing our own nurses.”

What is notable about the labor story in Massachusetts is that over a span of only three years providers have gone from the most desperate labor crisis they’d experienced in two decades to a situation where hope has replaced panic. In 2000, vacancies throughout the state were in the double digits in all job categories. CNAs were so hard to find that providers were forced to pay for temporary help at twice the rate they were paying staff CNAs. Squeezed by inadequate Medicaid payments on one end and the high costs of agency labor on the other, providers could only say a silent prayer for a recession that might offer up a willing labor pool.

Working with MECF, the

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Massachusetts Legislature spearheaded the Nursing Home Quality Initiative, a multipronged approach designed to break the cycle of hiring, training, and rehiring that was consuming nursing facility administrators throughout the state. The legislature approved a \$1 million CNA Scholarship Training Program under which MECF and its training partners joined forces to train and certify CNAs as a first step toward plugging the gap in the state's workforce. The training program has resulted in more than 3,000 new workers receiving training.

The Nursing Home Quality Initiative also included the Extended Care Career Ladder Initiative (ECCLI) to help providers build a future for their employees. The Commonwealth Corp., the state agency that administers the program, to date has awarded more than \$10 million in grants to more than 80 long term care employees, providing training for 3,000-plus entry-level workers and increasing their average wage by 7.5 percent. The ECCLI program has allowed providers to dramatically reduce their pool-use recruitment costs, and staff turnover rates.

"The legislative initiatives proved that the state has a critical role to play in assuring a stable, well-trained workforce," says Morse. "It is all the more appropriate that they exercise that role when the state is paying three out of every four dollars in Medicaid payments to support that care."

Overcoming Barriers

Labor experts say that just educating your workforce isn't enough to overcome other barriers to success in the workplace such as language, work-readiness skills, or even child-care issues. The Massachusetts Long Term Care Foundation, the education arm of MECF, long ago identified educational access as a key barrier to the success of the Massachusetts workforce and began funding scholarships for employees in long term care 17 years

ago. Since its modest beginning, the scholarship program has invested more than \$1.2 million in the workforce to support two- and four-year college degree programs and master's programs for some candidates. The foundation funds are donated by providers and vendors of long term care products and services.

These programs don't succeed overnight, so there needs to be solid and sustained support from the top all

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the way through the organization. It is not one benefit or program that makes the difference, though. It is the education combined with counseling, or a tuition reimbursement program with on-site preparatory courses that will help prepare employees for the actual college work before they go to college.

"What we are telling people is that pay is not necessarily the only driving factor in employee satisfaction," says Pat Campbell, director of business development for WorkSource Partners in Massachusetts, a worksite training company that has developed a niche in helping companies cultivate the talent of their entry-level employees. "When you look at the top three reasons for job satisfaction, career development is high up on that list."

Case In Point

The case of Tinamarie Forsyth demonstrates the value of onsite education programs. Forsyth began at Heritage as a CNA on the night shift in September 2001. Early on, she was recruited by Heritage's Director of

Career Development Barbara Corrigan, RN, to take a college placement test to see if she had an interest in pursuing a degree. Soon, the 34-year-old Forsyth was taking math, reading, and writing courses while holding down a full-time job as a CNA and raising three children. She continued taking college-credited courses, and by fall 2002 she was accepted into Holyoke Community College. In June 2003, she graduated with her LPN degree. Recently, she began working as an LPN at Heritage.

Heritage, an American Health Care Association Level 2 Quality Award winner, already has seen success from its efforts. But Heritage Hall East Senior Administrator Ira Schoenberger says the most amazing results have come from the experiences of seniors from the UMass School of Nursing, already RNs, who are spending time at Heritage to gain clinical experience toward their bachelor of science degrees.

"Many of them start out saying that there is no way they would ever work in a nursing facility, and then they are here for awhile talking about specializing in gerontology," he says.

Schoenberger doesn't want to jinx the company's good fortune by saying it out loud, but Heritage hasn't had to hire agency help to fill a CNA vacancy for three years, and the facility is rapidly approaching a situation where all licensed nursing positions in its four buildings will be filled without agency help.

No one is breathing easy, but for the first time in many years, Massachusetts providers say they may have turned a corner. ■

For More Information

■ The author can be reached at (800) 515-1776.

■ For nurse retention information, visit www.Integrity-Tr.com (go to the "Services" page).