

Mapping the Solution: Equitable Career Advancement for Entry-Level Healthcare Employees

Advancing in the healthcare workforce requires more than just initial skills training and education and entry-level job placement. The Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Program provides education and training to low-income individuals for jobs in healthcare, a field with higher wages and occupations that are expected to experience high demand over the next decade. Evaluations of the **HPOG Program** show that many participants complete education and training and attain jobs in healthcare at low -entry level wages, but career advancement is still out of reach for the majority. While many participants strive for higher level healthcare jobs that offer middle-class incomes, most get stuck in positions with few advancement opportunities. Additionally, women of color are overrepresented in positions that offer little opportunity for growth compared to white workers and men of color, indicating that they face additional structural barriers to advancement.

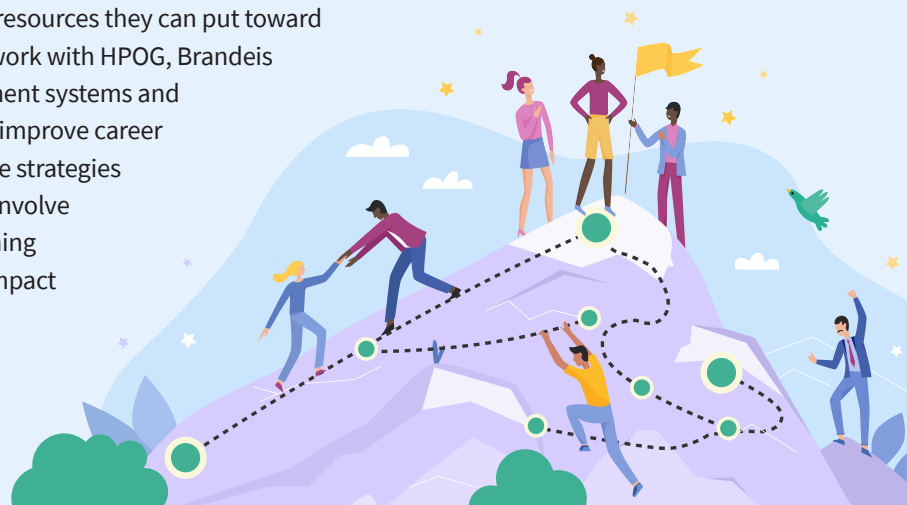
Foundational Findings:

- Career pathways for healthcare workers are increasingly viewed as a critical employer strategy to address turnover and fill gaps in specialization, skill development, quality of care, and community health.
- The healthcare field needs a strong combined effort from both the workforce development system and area employers to ensure individuals have career advancement opportunities, career navigation support systems, and quality “first job” experiences.

This brief reviews how career pathways programs can engage with employers to develop equity-centered advancement models that improve participants’ long-term career outcomes. Recommendations draw from the Brandeis University Institute for Assets and Social Policy’s (IASP’s) eight years of experience working with HPOG program partners. The Brandeis team most recently collaborated with **The WorkPlace** of Bridgeport, Connecticut, on their HPOG-funded Health CareRx Academy. Over their years of studying career pathways programs, they observed that many programs have transactional relationships with employers: programs provide a supply of potential employees to meet employer demand. That strategy may work well in some sectors, but in healthcare, the supply and demand model is no longer sufficient to set participants on a path toward long-term careers.

The first round of HPOG was implemented just after the Great Recession in 2008. It highlighted the ways healthcare employers can shape local labor markets as communities face economic recovery. **Employers can also have a hand in creating a more equitable recovery by actively addressing racial, ethnic, and gender inequities in the workforce.** Now in 2020, the U.S. is in the midst of a global pandemic and a national moment of recognition about the value of essential healthcare workers, as well as the health disparities within communities of color. This moment offers employers and workforce development programs a critical opportunity to engage in proactive partnerships for health career advancement with equity to improve both employer and participant outcomes.

Although organizations have different capacity levels and resources they can put toward building their own career pathway programs, through its work with HPOG, Brandeis identified five scalable strategies that workforce development systems and related programs, such those funded by HPOG, can use to improve career advancement opportunities for participants. Some of these strategies can be applied by an individual employer, and some may involve pooling the resources of multiple smaller firms. By combining resources, smaller firms can build their capacity to scale impact across the region.



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Strategies for Career Pathways Program Staff, Regional Workforce Development Boards and Funders

Strategy #1:

Collaborate with local employers to develop seamless career pathway models and innovative opportunities for healthcare employees.



- Actively engage employers with the workforce development system from the start of the proposal writing process. For example, involve employer partners in career advancement program design, rather than starting the conversation after programming begins or with job placement.
- Collaborate with local employers to offer education and training to low-wage incumbent employees in the areas of skill, certification, and professional development to promote advancement.
- Designate one staff member full-time to provide technical assistance to local employers interested in implementing career advancement opportunities (e.g., clearinghouses for information about programs, services, and assistance for incumbent workforce development).

Strategy #2:

Establish innovative ways to extend career support services to former program participants who are employed.



- Using an accessible and low-cost platform (e.g., mobile-friendly and/or internet-based tool), create a continuous health career advancement system to guide former participants to resources that will help them actively navigate career planning. Engage them in this process over the first three years post-program completion.
- Establish health career mentorship programs to help recent program graduates develop lasting mentor relationships that provide additional career advancement support, even when the employee is not located in the mentor's organization. This can be organized via employers and may be supported by local philanthropy.
- Provide access to real-time information by establishing a framework for rapid communication between employers, training programs enrolling participants, and area education providers about changing or new skill requirements for existing occupations or newly anticipated openings for which training can be developed to shape education and training.

Strategy #3:

Identify opportunities to pool resources and develop cross-institution career ladders that allow both employers and training providers to overcome capacity constraints.



- Facilitate opportunities to pool stakeholder resources (e.g., blending and braiding funding) to share the cost of training or other professional development activities for employees targeted to emerging and existing skill and education needs.
- Collaboratively establish a local healthcare employer consortium to create a regional pipeline for upskilling the incumbent workforce focused on retention, advancement, and community health equity.
- Engage a broader network of concerned stakeholders who can provide resources and support, particularly those who are interested in reducing regional wealth and health disparities.



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Strategy #4:

Develop a regional Quality Job Report Card for area health care employers, rating them on a range of quality measures related to income, benefits, hours, advancement opportunities, and professional development.



- Make the report card widely visible through local media (and possibly an annual award) to encourage employers to increase transparency, as well as help new workers target quality area employers for long-term employment. There are a number of existing reports you can modify.
- Focus on quality “first job” placement efforts with 1) employers that have articulated career pathways or 2) networked employer groups with tiered occupational pathways that correspond to meaningful wage increases.
- Develop metrics (or use existing ones) that include diversity and inclusion in hiring practices, career advancement training and credentialing opportunities,



Strategy #5:

Partner with workforce training providers, employers, and local equity experts to embed racial, ethnic, and gender equity within each of these strategies.



- Collaborate with employers to assess the demographic composition of their workforce within different job positions by race, ethnicity, and gender and set measurable, timebound goals to increase equity.
- Work to have health care employers articulate an organizational commitment to become a culturally effective organization and to move towards that practice first with a focus on the workforce
- Identify and address both structural and individual barriers to advancement that are specific to women of color.



The strategies identified here can lead to both short and long-term impacts by driving structural change in the workforce development system, employer practices, and the relationship between the two. Career advancement with equity for entry-level healthcare employees is a process of career counseling, education and training, job placement, and ongoing engagement with an infrastructure that is prepared to enable and enhance opportunities for career advancement, particularly for low-wage women of color.

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An Infrastructure for Advancement: Key Takeaways

Policy Implications: Broaden program design to enable career advancement as part of the organization's mission.

- Develop and fund a workforce development framework that supports programming for career advancement over a longer time period and a broader range of outcomes beyond credential attainment and “first job” placement.
- State governments should consider the broader implications of credentialism on barriers to career entry and streamline comprehensive credentialization to enhance quality of jobs and service.
- Encourage state workforce development and education agencies to identify opportunities to expand flexible credentialing options at public high education institutions and develop financial assistance mechanisms for non-traditional students.
- Increase Medicare reimbursement rates to improve income and benefit opportunities for the lowest skilled workforce.
- Require providers to pool workforce to increase hours and reduce per-diem hiring, either per individual after a short temp-to-hire period, or as a percentage of their work service.

Program Solutions: Bring It To Them

Career pathways programs need to increase their presence on site with employers and work directly with employees to support hiring, retention, and advancement.

- Hiring: Help re-write and re-frame job descriptions to emphasize education, skill, and diversity. Partner with local health care associations to do this.
- Paid Internships: Work with local training and education providers to build paid internship experiences into the HPOG model to get students over the “experience gap.”
- Career Counseling Onsite: Designate staff to go to worksites and continue in-person career coaching with former participants (e.g., online workshops, continuing education or training).
- Mentor Programs: Work with employers to build a network that connects participants to a mentor in healthcare who can be a resource to them and guide them as they move into new positions and seek new employment opportunities.

Additional Resources

Contact Brandeis University's team for more information about how to implement these strategies in your own organization. The team is available to provide technical assistance, as well as additional information and references to support the recommendations provided in this brief. Email iere@brandeis.edu or smadstewart@brandeis.edu or visit their [website](#).

Want to learn more? Check out these additional resources.

Career Pathways

- Rethinking Career Pathways and Advancement in Health Care <https://heller.brandeis.edu/iere/pdfs/jobs/rethinking-career-pathways-and-advancement-in-health-care.pdf>
- Mapping the Solution: Career Advancement for Entry-Level Healthcare Employees - Workforce Engagement <https://heller.brandeis.edu/iere/pdfs/jobs/workforce-development.pdf>

Labor Market and Workforce Diversity

- Perspectives and Practices of New Hampshire Health Care Employers: Improving Quality, Reducing Costs, and Planning for the Future by Building Culturally Effective Health Care Organizations <https://heller.brandeis.edu/iere/pdfs/jobs/perspectives-practices.pdf>
- Culturally Effective Healthcare Organizations: A Framework for Success <https://heller.brandeis.edu/iere/pdfs/jobs/culturally-effective.pdf>

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