

Strengthening New Hampshire's Health Care Workforce: Strategies for Employers and Workforce Development Leaders

December 2014

Introduction

A quality health care workforce is vital to the well being of New Hampshire's economy and the state's aging population. In coming years, the success of hospitals, community health centers, nursing homes, and other health care organizations will depend largely on their ability to hire and retain skilled employees who can deliver quality care to all. This will increasingly require a new focus on issues related to diversity. To ensure success, health care providers will be looking to hire well-trained, culturally competent, and diverse professionals for two primary reasons:

- the patient population is diversifying
- health care organizations are increasingly ranked and funded according to quality and equity measures

Between 2010 and 2020 the health care and social assistance industry is projected to create 28% of all new jobs in the U.S. economy. Expanded access to care resulting from the Affordable Care Act has contributed to some of this job growth.¹ This impacts New Hampshire, where 85,891 people currently work in health care. Along with projected growth, the retirement of older professionals is expected to continue to create job opportunities; in fact, from 2008-2018, more of these nationwide job openings will be due to replacement than growth.² The state must continue to build and retain a well-trained health care workforce to keep pace with these needs and respond to the changing health care environment. This brief outlines key strategies that New Hampshire employers, educational institutions, workforce development agencies, and community organizations can implement together to achieve this shared goal.

What will it take?

Four key strategies have potential to strengthen New Hampshire's health care workforce:

1. **Build Cutting-Edge Workplace Skills and Knowledge** - Update skills and competencies to meet the health care sector's changing needs.
2. **Integrate Workplace Experience and Environmental Preparation** - Prepare students to enter the field with experience to obtain and succeed in new careers.
3. **Structure Inter and Intra-Organizational Career Advancement** - Form clear career pathways within and across organizations.
4. **Create and Sustain Multi-level Professional Development** - Keep the existing workforce at all levels engaged in new learning and skill expansion.

This issue brief is part of an ongoing series drawing on the *Health Care Employer Research Initiative*, a four-year partnership of the Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP) at Brandeis University with the New Hampshire Office of Minority Health and Refugee Affairs (OMHRA). Findings are drawn from over 50 qualitative interviews with health care leaders, health care professionals, job developers and community leaders. Policy recommendations are based on the data generated from these interviews and ongoing discussions with OMHRA and partners, industry associations, and workforce development leaders. Findings and recommendations presented here are designed for leaders at health care organizations, community colleges, private training institutions, workforce development programs, and policy makers who strive to create a stronger workforce and health delivery system. Maximizing the quality and satisfaction of the workforce is a priority for businesses, educational institutions, and families across the Granite State. Authors: Jessica Santos, Janet Boguslaw, and Sandra Venner.

Strategy 1: Build Cutting-Edge Workplace Skills and Knowledge

Challenge

Employers and staff agree that training programs are not teaching all of the skills and knowledge that are truly needed in today's changing health care environment.



Employers and educational institutions can partner to upgrade curricula so that students leave with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed and employers need to provide quality care.

Multi-Skilled Workers

Health care employers expressed a need for more multi-skilled workers. The health care environment is becoming more integrated, which means that all employees must understand the “big picture.” For example, previously, only billing specialists were expected to truly understand the nature of insurance. Now, employers want new hires to have a general understanding of health care systems and how insurance works so they can provide optimal treatment as part of a care team. Workers can benefit from this additional skill attainment as well, as it can result in an increase in responsibilities and wages. Employers and educators recognize that educational curricula may need to be continuously upgraded to ensure employees acquire these desired skills.

“I think that some of these schools really need to...make sure that... people are actually prepared for what they’re going for so that way everybody’s happy.”

–Employee

“Medical Assistant is kind of a dead end job, it really is. You’re stuck doing that. Unless you can add maybe a billing education component to them, or could they learn to navigate the insurance side of the house? That might be helpful, but for the most part M.A. is stuck.”

–Employer

“It was specifically looking at yourself and questioning, ‘Are you prejudiced?’ Even I said it, ‘I’m not prejudiced.’ Then we started reading this text book...the thing touched me from word one...I was enraged by the thing, but as we went through this it was good to look at it and say, ‘You know what? Maybe, maybe I can understand that there’s an underlying racism that I was unaware that I had.’”

–Manager

Valued Non-Clinical Skills and Knowledge for Today’s Health Care Workplace Environment

- Use of electronic medical records
- Understanding of insurance and billing
- Ability to work as part of a team
- Critical thinking and problem solving skills
- Computer and writing skills
- Cultural competency
- Multi-lingualism
- Customer service

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is an increasingly important skill set in southern New Hampshire because the patient population is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse.³ Cultural competence is developed over the course of an individual’s career through experience, multiple trainings, reflection, and growth opportunities. This skill set enhances a health care professional’s ability to work well with a diverse range of co-workers and patients, and ensures that all patients receive quality treatment and care.

Cultural competence is defined as “a set of attitudes, skills, behaviors, and policies that enable staff to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.”⁴

Sample New Hampshire Job Description with Emphasis on Diversity

Employers are beginning to communicate the value of these skills through updated job descriptions. Explicit requirements for cultural and linguistic skills and knowledge of the communities being served can draw a more diverse applicant base. While some employers list “bilingual” as a requirement for a position that works directly with a certain population group, many others list it as a preferred skill, in addition to other preferred knowledge, skills, and abilities. This sets a tone that demonstrates to the public that the organization values a range of experience and knowledge in addition to specific clinical skills.

Responsibilities:

Sensitivity to cultural diversity of all clients, fellow employees, and visitors.

Knowledge/Skills/Abilities:

Ability to interact effectively with people of varied educational, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds, skill levels and value systems; to work with frequent interruptions and to respond appropriately to unexpected situations. Excellent listening skills.

Qualifications:

Bilingual in Spanish and English required.

Strategy 2: Integrate Workplace Experience and Environmental Preparation

Challenge

New graduates need experience to be hired, and schools need employer partners to provide sufficient clinical experience to satisfy that requirement.



Early exposure to the field, internships, and short-term clinicals combined with workplace environment training can improve opportunities for securing jobs and improve employer experiences of new employees.

Early Exposure to the Field

Educators can work with students so they understand the nature of health care work and the workplace environment at an early stage, allowing them to make informed decisions about their interest in and fit for this type of work. This improves the match up front and ensures that time and money on both sides is not wasted. Many students complete training and start a job without knowing what to expect from the health care environment. Because each provider organization is unique, educators and employers are using creative techniques to ensure that employment and training includes workplace knowledge, not just technical skill development, so there is a good fit before applicants commit to a professional direction.⁵

Workplace Experience

For many applicants, especially those who lack paid work experience, gaining exposure to the field and experience in the workplace during school enables them to enter full-time, well paid jobs upon graduation. Supervised opportunities include volunteer placements, internships, on-the-job training assignments, apprenticeships, or the Work Experience Program (WEP) offered through the welfare-to-work system. Experience enables interns to apply the skills they learned in school, receive further hands-on training, and obtain a recent, professional reference from a manager. For some, this has proven to be a way into entry-level professions. Many clinical health education programs strive to provide internship or practicum opportunities, but placements at health care organizations are becoming increasingly difficult to establish. Some schools even require students to find their own placements. These interns require supervision, teaching, and coordination. The most successful program models result from improved collaboration between educational programs and the workplace.

The average wage for entry-level work in New Hampshire for health care professionals is \$17.12 per hour. Experienced workers earn on average \$25.98 per hour.⁶

Workplace Environment

Hands-on learning can be complemented with knowledge gained in school that positions students for the professional environment they will be entering. Learning to be professional and savvy members of the workforce requires time and practice, a responsibility that can be shared by workers, educators, and employers alike. For example, learning what may come up throughout the course of a day in the workplace, how to respond to a crisis, when to go to a supervisor, and how to access employee benefits through Human Resources are all examples of sector-specific knowledge that arms students with the skills they need to succeed. This knowledge also empowers the emerging health care workforce to understand the rights and responsibilities of employees, how to access opportunities for advancement, and how they fit into the larger health care system. Students and employers will benefit if education and training programs integrate these competencies into their ongoing programming and continually reinforce them over time.

Essential Skills for the Health Care Environment⁷

- Critical thinking, problem solving and decision making
- Communication strategies and conflict resolution
- Professionalism (appearance, timeliness, and first impressions)
- Customer service/privacy issues
- Safety in the workplace
- Diversity and cultural competence
- Employee rights and the role of Human Resources
- Business ethics for the office
- Building better teams
- Knowledge of health care system and insurance reimbursements

Finding the Right “Fit”

It is just as important for employers to find the right “fit” in their applicants, while also developing a workplace environment that fosters a quality workforce and is welcoming to all. Enhanced skills empower workers to seek and acquire a position that is best for them. However, employers also assess “fit,” and their cultural lens may impact the assessment of who is “professional” or the right “fit.” These interpersonal assessments continue once an individual is hired. For example, what appears to be a positive attitude and eager staff member to one manager may appear rude, aggressive, or overstepping one’s role to another. All managers and staff require ongoing professional development to ensure that their practices are aligned with the expectations and skills of the new workforce.

“It’s hard to describe to somebody what it’s like to work here so as part of the interview process we offer you the opportunity to come and spend anywhere between two and four hours shadowing a staff member... That has helped a lot. [Some] say, ‘Oh my God yeah, this is exactly what I was looking for,’ or ‘Nope I thought it was something else’...and they self-select out.”

–Employer

“Critical thinking is good patient care. We’ve created a bunch of task people.”

–Employer

“That’s good when you get hired off your internship, that means they were very pleased with what you’ve learned which I knew, ‘wow, okay, I got this.’ I was happy.”

–Employee

“Six of my existing staff I hired through WEP. So, we do take a lot of feeds through that program because it gets them a foot in the door and it gets them something on their resume and it gives us a chance to see, you know, what’s their stick-to-it-ness.”

–Employer

“I’m interested in their attitude. I’m interested in their professionalism. I’m interested in their skill sets that I need that best match with that role.”

–Employer

“Entry level positions are usually younger people who have a different mindset about what they feel they need to be a good employee. [Educators could] cover the basics of employment, which means showing up on a timely manner, being appropriately dressed, following policies and procedures...”

–Employer

These changes can contribute to a broader employee base and expanded opportunities for existing employees. Employers are beginning to implement such changes within their organizations to create diverse and inclusive workplace environments. On-going professional staff development can contribute to this at the worksite or through the community.

“I think our philosophy is that we hire people for the right attitude and so, as we are interviewing, we’re selecting people and know what attitude and behaviors are going to lead to success. I do think though, as we have a more diverse workforce, we do have to be more mindful about how we integrate people into the workforce, how we celebrate diversity, and encourage that respectful treatment...”

–Employer

“Culturally, I’ve learned a lot. I actually had to go back to my boss and say, ‘Alright, this is what I have for candidates, do I have some culturally underlying bias that’s making me not lean this way, help me with this. I ultimately hired that nurse and once she came in, then I got it. Okay, [you] don’t look at positions of authority this way...you wait for the next question to be asked, you don’t ask questions...it was a cultural thing and I just didn’t know it.”

–Manager

“The type of people that nursing is pulling in are smart maybe in a book, math/science way but not necessarily in an adaptation way...some of the multicultural staff are probably the best problem solvers I’ve ever worked with.”

–Employer

Strategy 3: Structure Inter and Intra-Organizational Career Advancement

Challenge

The path to advancement for motivated health care workers is unclear and informal, depending largely on the resources of individual employers or programs.



Health care offers great potential for career ladder development between organizations in new and innovative ways.

Pathways Within Organizations

Small- and mid-sized health care organizations, such as long-term care facilities and community health centers, have limited job openings on an annual basis. This makes it difficult to establish career ladders or guarantee promotions. Nevertheless, some provide small incentives such as tuition reimbursements, flexible schedules, or mentoring to assist their employees with advancement.

Hospitals are larger and employ a wide range of occupations, including technicians, specialists, and administrative positions. This provides an excellent setting to pilot, test, and develop career ladders that meet the changing needs of the organization while also offering motivated employees opportunities for higher wages and more challenging jobs. Educational institutions can coordinate with hospitals and other health care providers to articulate and implement career ladders ensuring that students have a direct pipeline from school to work to career advancement.

“I’m a big proponent of education, obviously, but I just started to put together some Lunch and Learns for them. I’ve tried to bring in some of the community colleges...I will bend over backwards, I will even work the day for people in order for them to go take their entrance exams or go file their paperwork. If you want to go to nursing school, I will fix your schedule so you can go.”

–Employer

“These [employer sponsored] programs can help workers who might not have been prepared for college when they first entered the labor market to attend college with support from their employers. Employers benefit from improving the skills of their employees and from the lower turnover rates they often enjoy in association with these programs.”⁸

- Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

Structuring an Informal System

There are few established health care career ladders in New Hampshire. Without formal policies in place, employees are dependent on their own knowledge and the support and goodwill of their employers to climb up in their career. The types of policies and support offered, when in place, can vary widely. Previous reports suggest that racial and ethnic minorities face additional barriers when trying to advance in the health field; in New Hampshire, racially and ethnically diverse professionals are overrepresented in long-term care work and underrepresented in hospital and ambulatory care settings.⁹ As the state becomes increasingly diverse, it is especially crucial for these diverse populations to access advancement opportunities and assume leadership positions in health care. This produces benefits for patients, workers, and the health of the overall community.¹⁰

Many health care employers care deeply about the economic stability and opportunity of their workforce. They encourage their staff to advance, even if it means they will leave their organizations in the long-term. These employers find that their support helps retain motivated staff who are dedicated to the organization and skilled in serving its clientele during their period of employment. Nevertheless, many employees must get creative if they want to advance. One respondent created a career ladder on her own. She started with a Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences, became a Licensed Practical Nurse, and then later received her Registered Nursing degree. Now she is continuing on for a Master's to specialize in mental health counseling. On the challenging side, the health care field may be losing motivated, skilled professionals to other fields. The field may also be losing out on talented professionals of color who leave due to lack of clarity and support for advancement pathways.

State and federal workforce development programs provide unique opportunities for individuals to invest in their education and career. Several interviewees in this study utilized support from the New Hampshire Health Profession Opportunity Project (HPOP), a health care workforce development program, to advance. One respondent found that HPOP gave her the added structure and resources she needed to complete training she had started years ago. Other employees have utilized resources from HPOP to gain additional skills, certifications, or to attend specialty training programs which help them advance and earn higher wages, even if they do not currently have plans to obtain an advanced degree. Education and training providers need employers who will actively engage with them to help guide, structure, and support career advancement opportunities.

"I took all my pre-reqs for their RN program...I was kind of torn because I already have a ton of student loans and I think it was another \$50,000 after I did my clinicals...So [I] kind of weighed out my options and somebody had mentioned HPOP to me and that really opened up a lot of doors for me."

–Employee

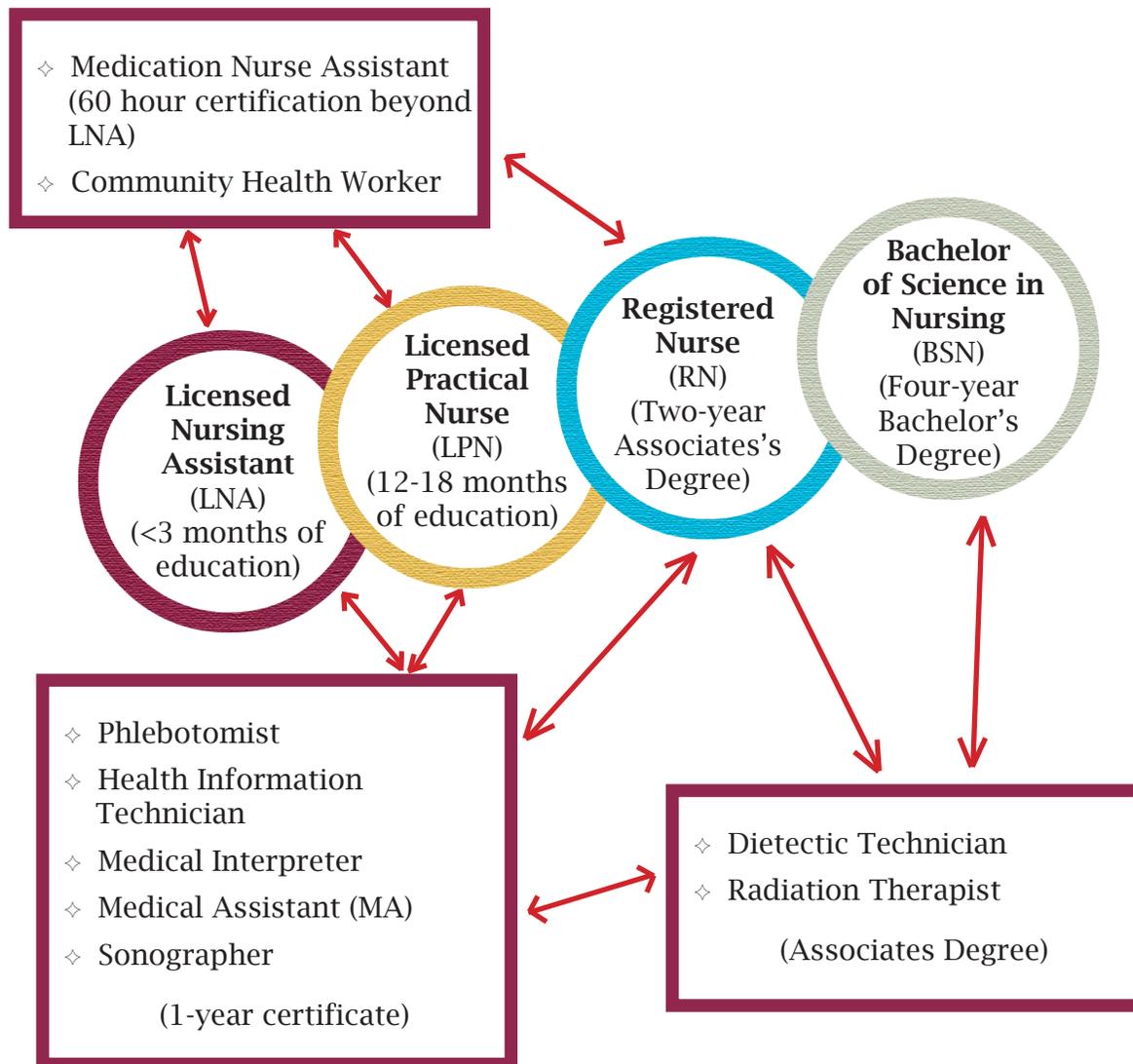
When asked, "is it harder for minority workers to advance in health care?" a white worker pointed out that biases can and do impact advancement opportunities: "Yeah, I think it's harder for them [minorities]...Ok, so in New Hampshire, there is still, in my opinion, this underlying expectation of you know, this population is lazy and this population doesn't show up. That population, no they're not going to last."

–Employee

Another respondent is now on track to complete her Bachelor's degree after initially dropping out of college. "When I was fresh out of school, I graduated high school, I went to [name of university] for a couple years, but I couldn't afford to finish the degree. I kind of got stuck for a few years just trying to pay that back. And luckily [name of educational program] took... [the school] and HPOP together accepted all my credits...the plan is to finish the Health Care Management degree in a year."

–Employee

Multiple Paths to Multi-Skill Training and Career Advancement



Pathways Between Organizations

In order to sustain the workforce development successes offered by specific programs, new models that reduce dependence on federal funding will be required. Employers understand that workforce development is a shared problem and it is not enough to leave it exclusively in the hands of federally funded workforce programs.

This shift in thinking, away from a program or organization-centric model and towards a systems level model, has already taken place in health care for patients. Movements are underway to create patient centered medical homes and streamline services. These include articulated agreements between community health centers and hospitals for specialty referrals, two-way communication through electronic medical records to follow patients and track outcomes, and health systems that run hospitals, long-term care facilities, and more under the same umbrella.

“How do we as leaders, and how do my managers and my supervisors, and my team leads, how do we work collaboratively to make this person successful? Because we’re all making an investment. All of us. Not just the Federal Government.”

–Employer

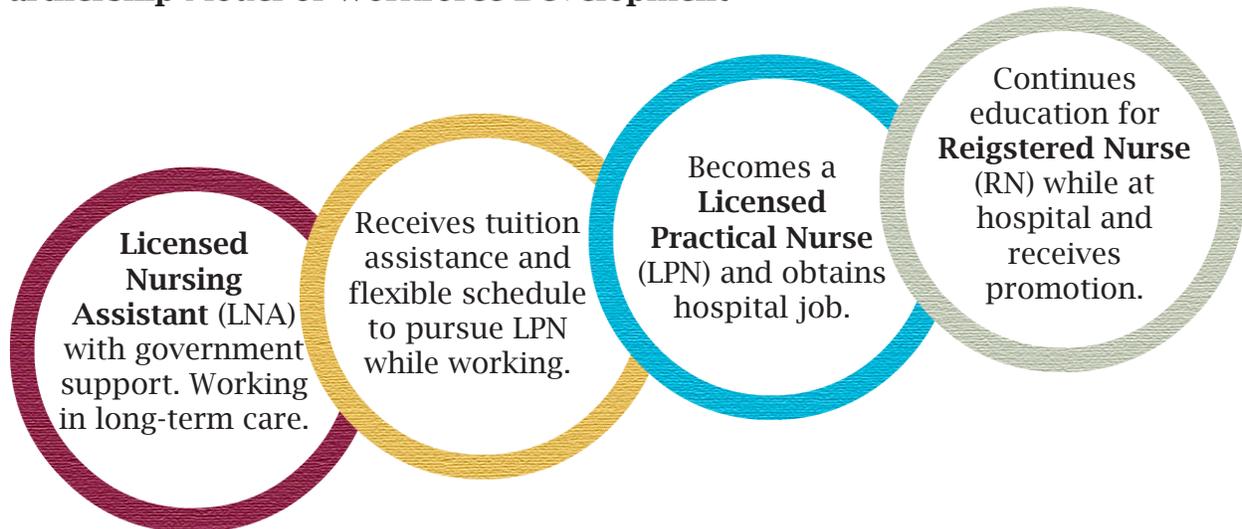
Changing Health Care Career Models

New models require developing career ladders that span organizational boundaries, articulating advancement agreements between different types of health care organizations, and two-way communication between educators and employers to ensure that shared investments are resulting in effective outcomes. They also require new networks and systems, including innovations such as a regional pool of training dollars for health care workforce advancement, and a regional employer network focused on workforce development which draws from long-term care and home care agencies, area hospitals, and community health centers.

Imagine a LNA at a long-term care organization who receives support (flexible scheduling and tuition assistance) to attend school earning her LPN while working. She then transitions to a job at a hospital. While at the hospital she has the opportunity to become a RN, resulting in a stable job with benefits and pay which supports her family. The long-term care organization benefits from having a motivated LNA who is committed to staying throughout the course of her schooling to achieve her future goals, reducing short-term turnover for the employer.

The hospital benefits by gaining a LPN with hands-on experience in the health care field who has demonstrated a willingness to stay and advance. The employee benefits from having a pathway to follow and the knowledge that one day she will have a job that is stable and pays a living wage, motivating her to invest her time and resources to advance. Finally, the patients at each facility benefit because they receive high quality care from an employee that is motivated, engaged, stable, and experienced. Coordinating such pathways rather than leaving it to chance benefits everyone.

A Partnership Model of Workforce Development



Strategy 4: Create and Sustain Multi-Level Professional Development

Challenge

Long-time health care workers have to continuously maintain or upgrade their skills to stay current and responsive to the changes in the way health care is delivered.



Employers and employees benefit from professional development which ensures that the workforce matches the changing health care environment.

Professional development is closely related to advancement. It is typically managed by employers, organized by Human Resources, and implemented either internally or through outside experts. Professional development can be mandatory or voluntary and it provides employees the skills and knowledge they require to stay current in their professions.

Employees can take advantage of professional development opportunities through their place of employment, professional associations such as the New Hampshire Nursing Association, or industry associations such as the New Hampshire Hospital Association. Many are required to earn continuing education credits annually to renew their license.

The content of professional development varies according to the needs of the workplace. It is not always about technical skills. It can inspire the workforce and introduce skills and knowledge that students may not have received in the past. This type of development—including cultural competency training—enables employees to perform their work more effectively and ensures that all patients receive the same chance to achieve optimal health. Most professionals interviewed in this study received some cultural competency education but very few had ongoing training. Ongoing trainings and educational opportunities for all levels of professionals, including managers and supervisors, are vital to ensuring that organizations can change and respond to patient needs.

“I left the hospital before they went to EMRs. I came over here...I’d much rather do it on a piece of paper but that’s not how it’s going so even I am at a disadvantage because I was not trained on EMRs.”

–Employee

“They [the staff] have to have a willingness to change, because protocols and how you used to care for patients is changing rapidly with technology.”

–Employer

“We had a motivational speaker come...he was some sort of mediator. He was really good, really smooth talker and very inspirational. So staffing the hospital with people like that who know how to deal with relationship problems with coworkers, that would be helpful.”

–Employee

“In school we learned [about] all different backgrounds... even on our tests we had—if this person would get this meal, what would you do?...So we learned a lot about it. So I think it’s a lot more in your schooling than in your job. Because I never heard anything about any sort of diversity through my job.”

–Employee

Stakeholder Strategies for Developing a Strong Workforce Pipeline

There are multiple opportunities for New Hampshire stakeholders to develop a strong health care workforce. The strategies outlined in this brief are organized below according to four phases of the workforce pipeline: student, new hire, incumbent worker, and health care administrator and leader. For each strategy, the most appropriate stakeholders are listed.

Strategies	Key Stakeholder Roles
Pipeline Phase 1: Student	
Offer multi-skill training	Educators
Design courses to closely match the workplace environment	Employers, Employees, and Educators
Offer opportunities for workplace environment skill building throughout all courses	Educators
Integrate cultural competency training throughout all courses and require for graduation	Educators and Community Experts
Fund the development of internships in health care to increase workplace experience	Educators, Employers, and Government
Pipeline Phase II: New Hire	
Revise job descriptions to demonstrate value of diversity, language, and cultural competency	Employers, Employees, and Patients
Build in a trial period for new employees with limited experience	Employers
Provide orientation which includes workplace policies, cultural competency, and an understanding of the role of the Human Resources department	Employers
Discuss employees' career goals and share resources for advancement within the organization or beyond	Employees and Supervisors
Review potential skill gaps and create a plan for ongoing education and training	Employees and Supervisors
Pipeline Phase III: Incumbent Worker	
Require, offer, and share resources for professional development for professionals at all levels of the organization	Educators and Employers
Require and offer ongoing cultural competency training	Educators and Employers
Revisit workers' career goals and share resources for advancement within the organization or beyond	Employees and Supervisors
Review potential skill gaps and create a plan for ongoing training which matches the needs of the job	Employees and Supervisors
Identify funding to support individual advancement	Employers, Educators, and Government
Pipeline Phase IV: Health Care Administrator and Leader	
Partner to determine current and future workforce needs and opportunities	Employers, Employees, and Labor Market Experts
Design new models of career advancement including those that pool resources and span organizational boundaries	Employers, Educators, and Funders
Set standards and policies regarding cultural competence at the individual and organizational levels	Educators, Employers, Community Experts, Professional Associations, Policymakers

Moving Forward

As our nation and state experience significant changes in the way health care is delivered and financed, stakeholders must respond by educating, preparing, and advancing workers ensuring that the quality of health care remains high. It is time to innovate and redirect New Hampshire's workforce development system to keep pace with the state's integrated health care delivery needs by developing an increasingly flexible and multi-skilled workforce that reflects emerging population trends and needs. Employers and educators have an opportunity to embrace new roles and collaborations so that workers at all stages of the workforce pipeline develop the complex interpersonal, intercultural, and inter-professional skills that the health care system and ever-changing population require. Setting aspirational goals, together employers, educators, and employees can make sure that New Hampshire has the strongest health care delivery system and healthiest population in the nation.

Resources for New and Incumbent Workers in Health Care

Health Profession Opportunity Project (HPOP)

Through a federal grant to the New Hampshire Office of Minority Health and Refugee Affairs, the Health Profession Opportunity Project provides training in health care occupations for new and incumbent low-income and minority workers. Through training, career coaching and ongoing assessment, new workers experience improved employment opportunities and incumbent workers have more opportunities for advancement. For more information please visit: www.nhhpop.org.

ICU-Health Care Employment & Training Grant

Through a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, several public colleges in New Hampshire are partnering with New Hampshire hospitals and state agencies to train and upgrade skills in the health care field. Training leading to a certificate, licensure, or degree in critical needs areas is provided to incumbent workers in need of new skills, long-term unemployed, or certain underemployed workers. For more information please contact William Athanas at wathanas@ccsnh.edu.

On-the-Job Training (OJT)

Through the Federal Workforce Investment Act, New Hampshire Works offers an On-the-Job Training program to reimburse a business for the cost of training a new employee. Candidates for OJT must be hired into full-time positions and have been unemployed long term or eligible for public assistance benefits. The business creates a 3-6 month customized training plan to address trainee skill gaps and the trainee is considered an employee of the business from day one. For more information please visit: nhworks.org/training-program.cfm.

Registered Apprenticeship

New Hampshire is participating in the Federal Registered Apprenticeship program. Businesses can partner with the U.S. Department of Labor to create a flexible training program for sought-after career positions including ones in health care. Participating businesses may qualify for state tax benefits and apprentices learn new skills and receive incremental wage increases as they progress through the training. For more information please visit: www.doleta.gov/oa.

End Notes

- ¹Under the Affordable Care Act of 2010, an expansion in access to care has resulted in an increase in medical visits, and approximately one-third of the anticipated job growth in the health sector for registered nurses, medical assistants, medical secretaries, diagnostic technicians, and other health care workers. Frogner, B. K., & Spetz, J. (October 2013). *Affordable Care Act of 2010: Creating Job Opportunities for Racially and Ethnically Diverse Populations*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.
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- ¹⁰Boguslaw, J., Venner, S., Santos, J., & Nsiah-Jefferson, L. (November 2013). *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*. Waltham, MA: Institute on Assets and Social Policy.

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For more information or to get involved, please contact Sandra Venner at venner@brandeis.edu

The Institute on Assets and Social Policy, Brandeis University

415 South Street, MS 035

Waltham, MA 02454

(781) 736-8685

www.iasp.brandeis.edu

IASP

