

# An Innovative Approach to Developing Entry-Level Workers

By Neil Silverston and Jerry Rubin



Changing demographics and shortages of skilled workers are forcing many companies to find new sources for employees and innovative approaches to recruit and keep them. An industry that has faced significant labor shortages is health care. WorkSource Partners of Brookline, Mass., has developed a win-win approach that provides good jobs for workers and a talented, motivated and stable workforce for their employers.

## Elements of a “Grow Your Own” HR Career Advancement Strategy

- Create greater transparency for the career advancement opportunities in your company. What are the ladders, and their educational/skill/competency requirements for moving up?
- Develop strong internal leadership at all levels of the organization to ensure the program is sustainable.
- Provide career navigation services for employees seeking to move up: career and education coaching.
- Provide flexible education and training services: affordable, scheduled and delivered as needed by employees.
- Provide supervisory training and incentives so that supervisors are encouraged and supported to help their reports seek out and succeed in advancement opportunities.

## OVERVIEW

WorkSource Partners, a workforce development firm that designs and implements career development and education programs for entry-level workers, has helped long-term care employers and their community college partners develop comprehensive CNA-to-LPN career ladder programs to fill nursing vacancies. By bringing pre-college and college education to the workplace – in conjunction with career counseling and case management support – WorkSource has helped employers design, implement and expand a “grow your own” career advancement model: the Regional Advancement Center.

The RAC, currently in operation in three regions of Massachusetts that have clusters of nursing home sites, creates sufficient scale to make it feasible for community colleges to deliver education and career counseling services at the worksite and to tailor nursing home programs for the long-term care industry.

The impact of the strategy for addressing the LPN shortage has been especially significant at the two sites that are further devel-

oped: the five facilities in Western Massachusetts owned by Genesis HealthCare, one of the nation’s largest providers of long-term care and rehabilitation therapy, and the eleven independent non-profit facilities in Worcester that comprise the Intercare Alliance.

This grow-your-own strategy has yielded significant financial benefits to employers, as well as improved patient care as a result of reduced staff turnover and vacancy rates. Genesis HealthCare has ended its use of agency nurses to fill LPN vacancies at its five facilities – saving \$500,000 per year. The model also helped Genesis significantly reduce turnover of nursing assistants and agency fees. CNA turnover rates have dropped by 30 percent to 40 percent at Alliance facilities in the past two years.

## PROGRAM DESIGN AND ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

The CNA-to-LPN programs sponsored by Genesis HealthCare and the Intercare Alliance offer a sequence of educational steps coupled with counseling and support services to prepare workers to enter and succeed in community college-sponsored LPN programs. Both sites contract with a local community college partner to deliver a full sequence of preparatory educational courses as well as a customized evening LPN program. Genesis partners with Holyoke Community College, and the Intercare Alliance partners with Quinsigamond. At both Regional Advancement Centers, employees receive counseling and support services on each step of the ladder.

The career ladder sequence begins with pre-college courses at the worksite in math and English for employees who need additional academic skill development to qualify for college-level coursework. Intercare Alliance employers have created a separate space for this part of the RAC: the Notre Dame Educational Bridge Center, owned and managed by one of the Alliance Members, Notre Dame Long Term Care Center.

Workers who complete the pre-college courses or who test directly into college-level work by passing the College Placement Test can enroll in the prerequisite college courses required for entry into the LPN program. The three prerequisite courses to enter the Holyoke Community College program are an introduction to psychology, human development and human anatomy and physiology. Intercare Alliance employees selected for the program must take four prerequisite courses to enroll at Quinsigamond Community College: two psychology courses, biology, and “Math for Meds.”

To promote financial sustainability, the Genesis-Holyoke Community College evening LPN program is built on a community satellite model – that is, courses are part of college’s regular

catalog and open to the community at large. This approach makes it possible to split program costs between community residents and the employer, and it also allows the college to tap into relevant state subsidies/FTE payments that may become available. For each cycle of the program, Holyoke has held a certain number of seats for Genesis employees, and those individuals who pass the prerequisite courses are then eligible to enter the program. Community members who wish to enroll for the other seats in the program must also complete the prerequisites.

The Alliance facilities collectively contract with Quinsigamond to provide an LPN program that can accommodate 24 students each year. After passing the prerequisite courses, students can enroll in the customized 10-month, evening and weekend, LPN program. The program is full time and has a very demanding schedule: students are in class from 4 to 10 p.m., with additional clinical rotations every other weekend from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. All remedial and prerequisite courses are held at the Educational Bridge Center and the college campus.

Genesis HealthCare contracts with Holyoke to deliver a similar sequence of educational courses, culminating in a 10-month evening and weekend LPN program. The students are in classroom instruction two or three days per week from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m., and the clinical rotation days are twice per week from 4 p.m. to 11 p.m., with no weekend instruction. All remedial and prerequisite courses are offered at the company's five-facility campus in Western Massachusetts.

Employers at both RACs contract with WorkSource Partners to provide a comprehensive set of employee outreach and counseling services. Staff from WorkSource conduct outreach sessions at all facilities to communicate the employer's commitment to career development and to solicit employee interest in participating in the CNA-to-LPN program. A WorkSource career development specialist then conducts a one-on-one session to help each interested employee develop a career plan based on an assessment of his/her academic skill level, career interests and life circumstances. Employees who enroll in CNA-to-LPN career advancement courses (from pre-college prep through the pre-nursing program) receive ongoing academic and "life" coaching to help them juggle the conflicting demands of family, work and school.

To help employees meet the demands of a full-time education, Alliance employers limit the work schedule of students in the LPN program to no more than 24 hours a week, and they provide flexible work schedules, especially around exams. All full-time employees who enroll in the LPN program agree to reduce their work hours until they graduate. At Genesis, the negotiation of work schedules is informal and conducted on a case-by-case basis. Managers across the Genesis Campus are committed to this program and have been supportive and flexible in this process.

#### DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPATING EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS

The first class of 24 students entered the Intercare Alliance-Quinsigamond Community College LPN program in 2002. All have been CNAs in one of the 11 member nursing homes. Each Alliance facility had up to three slots to fill in the program. For the second class, entering in 2004, the Alliance allowed a local,

non-member nursing home to fill six of 24 slots. The Alliance anticipates a similar mix of member and non-member homes filling slots in the next class.

After being selected to participate in the program, candidates take the College Placement Test to determine if they are eligible for the prerequisite college courses. The first year of the program, only nine of 48 candidates passed the CPT, forcing the program to delay its start for six months so that those who did not pass could take remedial math and English courses. Based on this first-year experience, the Alliance, with help from WorkSource, set up a formal "Bridge program" that provides remedial math and English instruction to employees interested in enrolling in the LPN program or other college-level courses.

The Genesis HealthCare-Holyoke Community College LPN program enrolls a mix of Genesis employees and community members in the evening/weekend LPN program. The inaugural 2004 class of 25 students included 14 Genesis employees; eight of the 24 students who began the 2005 program were Genesis employees. Almost all the Genesis employees are CNAs.

The vast majority of Genesis employees who enroll in the LPN program need to take remedial English and math courses to qualify; 14 of the 22 employees in the first two LPN classes completed remedial courses prior to enrolling. Genesis offers both adult basic education and pre-college math and English courses to any interested employees at the company's Western Massachusetts campus. So far, 74 have taken pre-college courses towards nursing.

#### COSTS AND FINANCING OF PROGRAM

The costs per person for the Alliance-Quinsigamond CNA-to-LPN program are as follows:

- \$400-\$450 for pre-college classes (includes book costs);
- \$450-\$500 for each of the four required prerequisite courses (including book costs);
- \$5,896 in tuition and fees for the LPN program (excluding \$775 in estimated book costs); and
- Approximately \$65 per person for counseling services provided by WorkSource Partners staff.

The costs per person for the Genesis-Holyoke CNA-to-LPN program are as follows:

- Approximately \$700 for pre-college reading/writing and math classes;
- Approximately \$300 for each of three prerequisite courses;
- \$7,997 for tuition and fees for LPN program; and
- Approximately \$120 per person for counseling services provided by WorkSource.

Employers cover the bulk of program costs at both sites. Alliance members and Genesis pay all LPN program tuition and fees. In exchange, Alliance employees are required to "pay back" this tuition benefit by committing to work at their facility for two years after earning the LPN license. Genesis employees are required to make a similar commitment: they pay back the benefit at a rate of one hour for each dollar of tuition they use.

Employers also contribute toward the cost of pre-college and prerequisite courses. For the Alliance, the prerequisite costs are paid by Intercare. The costs of the pre-college classes can be paid by the student (who may get financial aid), ECCLI, or the facility (through tuition reimbursement programs). At Genesis, these

courses have been paid for primarily through ECCLI and tuition reimbursement. Genesis offers a tuition assistance program: employees can apply for funds to cover most of their LPN program costs. A major part of career counseling is identifying the types of financial aid that the employees might qualify to receive via scholarships and grants. In addition, each employee can get assistance in applying for financial aid through Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) forms.

Federal Pell Grants help to offset employer tuition costs for eligible employees. To take advantage of this funding source, Alliance employers now require employees who enroll in the LPN program to fill out the FAFSA forms. Ten of the 20 students in the class of 2005 received Pell Grants ranging from \$1,000 to \$1,800.

Employers make other important financial contributions to defray program costs. Alliance employers provide flexible work schedules and continue to pay full medical and dental benefits for participating employees who work a reduced, 24-hours-per-week schedule. Genesis front-line managers work with employees on a case-by-case basis to provide flexible work schedules to accommodate the LPN program, enabling employees to maintain benefits. Recently, Genesis has made a policy change enabling employees participating in a Nursing program to maintain their health benefits with a 20-hours-per-week schedule. Employers also contribute classroom space, computers and a portion of the costs of a director to manage the program. Genesis also contributes the time of its RNs to serve as adjunct faculty to the Holyoke LPN program. For the Intercare program, all LPN instructors are from the college partner. However, staff development coordinators from the Alliance teach the Math for Meds prerequisite course.

State ECCLI funding has supported program development costs, including program design and planning assistance provided by WorkSource and the partial salary of a program director at the Genesis and Alliance RACs. ECCLI funds have also paid for the employee outreach and counseling services provided by WorkSource and a portion of the tuition for pre-college courses and prerequisite courses.

## PROGRAM RESULTS

The retention and completion rate for CNA-to LPN programs have been outstanding at both locations:

- Seventy-five percent of the Alliance employees who enrolled in the first LPN class completed the program. Seventeen of the 18 graduates passed the licensure exam on the first try. Twenty-three of the 24 students who enrolled in the 2004-05 program passed the first semester.
- Thirteen of the 14 Genesis employees who enrolled in the first class completed the program. Six of the eight employees who entered the second class in the fall of 2005 are still enrolled and near completion.
- An additional 17 Genesis employees and 29 Alliance employees were enrolled in the pre-college segment during 2004-05. ■

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