

Jobs to Careers

*Transforming the Front Lines
of Health Care*

“Growing Their Own” Skilled Workforces: Community Health Centers Benefit from Work-Based Learning for Frontline Employees

By David Altstadt

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Through the *Jobs to Careers* work-based learning approach, we have built a skilled, stable frontline workforce—improving our ability to deliver high-quality care and services in a systematic and consistent manner.”

—Betty Cheng, chief operating officer, Charles B. Wang Community Health Center

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

Health care reform calls for fundamental changes in the nation’s health insurance system and unprecedented investments in community health centers, paving the way to serve millions more Americans who are currently uninsured, underserved, or medically disadvantaged. Yet unless community health centers can resolve persistent workforce shortages, they will be hard pressed to reach those in need and meet the demand for affordable, high-quality, cost-effective health care.

The nation’s 1,200 community, migrant, homeless, and public housing health centers serve 20 million in 7,000 communities across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the territories. Through health care reform, they will receive an additional \$11 billion over the next five years to help them meet the needs of newly insured Americans—expanding services, opening clinics in more communities, and hiring additional staff.

As a result of these investments, it is estimated that community health centers will:

- Double the number of patients served, to 40 million annually by 2015. This influx would exceed by 10 million patients the goal set by the National Association of Community Health Centers as part of its Access for All America plan.
- Create almost 300,000 full-time jobs for primary care providers and frontline staff (Whelan 2010).

Filling these jobs will be a major challenge for the centers, which experience difficulty attracting and retaining well-qualified workers in the rural and urban communities they serve (NACHC 2009). Indeed, periodic or ongoing shortages of physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and certified nurse midwives have garnered much attention, and community health centers have advocated successfully for additional resources to recruit and train more primary care providers (NACHC n.d.). **Yet to deliver more and better care, community health centers must also invest in the skills and education of every member of their health care teams, not just doctors and other high-level professionals.**

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

In particular, community health centers can expect to hire additional:

- Medical assistants and other allied health occupations requiring postsecondary certificates or degrees;
- Nursing assistants and physical therapy assistants;
- Staff skilled in information technology to handle the transition to electronic medical records, manage and code health records in clinical settings, provide IT support, and analyze data and systems to help improve medical care; 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, community health centers 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, *Jobs to Careers* has helped health centers develop a “grow your own” workforce solution to this challenge.

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, their potential for delivering more and better care and filling critical vacancies in professional positions goes largely untapped.

The frontline workforce includes nurse assistants, laboratory technicians, substance abuse counselors, and medical records and administrative staff, among other occupations. Most of these workers are women earning \$40,000 or less per year. Most have less than a Bachelor’s degree, and they tend to have few education credentials beyond 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 quality service and patient care. Too often, the result is low morale and high turnover among frontline workers.

Through *Jobs to Careers*, community health centers 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 *Jobs to Careers* is work-based learning: frontline employees master occupational and academic skills in the course of completing their jobs tasks and fulfilling their day-to-day responsibilities. While working full time, the employees enter college and earn academic credit for workplace training. Other learning approaches in *Jobs to Careers* include technology-enabled, experience-based, and traditional worksite and off-site learning.

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 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 education providers award 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 base of knowledge necessary for their jobs. In turn, they receive immediate financial rewards and qualify to advance to new positions. Health centers build and retain talented and committed employees, while bolstering a workplace culture that supports professional development, mentorship, and collaboration. And patients receive high-quality care and services, delivered by a high-quality workforce.

Examples from the Field

Four community health centers have participated in *Jobs to Careers*: Charles B. Wang Community Health Center (New York, New York); East Boston Neighborhood Health Center (Boston, Massachusetts); Tenderloin Health (San Francisco, California); and Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center (Waianae, Hawaii).

CHARLES B. WANG COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER

Charles B. Wang Community Health Center and the City College of New York are partnering to address the need for skilled bilingual and bicultural health care workers to serve the city's growing Asian-American population. Frontline employees have engaged in work-based learning covering health information technology, teamwork, customer service, and understanding the U.S. health care system. Program graduates earn certificates of completion and qualify for wage increases and promotions. The center has reported higher retention and improved performance of frontline employees as a result of *Jobs to Careers*.

Frontline workers targeted for training opportunities

- Medical assistants
- Health educators
- Outreach workers
- Social work assistants
- Patient service representatives
- Family health workers
- Care managers

Outcomes

- 50 employees have received training or are currently in training.



A training session for medical assistants at the Charles B. Wang Community Health Center

EAST BOSTON NEIGHBORHOOD HEALTH CENTER

Frontline workers targeted for training opportunities

- Medical assistants
- Clerical assistants

Outcomes

- 60 employees enrolled in pre-college English or math classes in preparation for the interpreting course, Associate's degrees, or other credentials.
- 27 employees have completed the auxiliary interpreter training program and become certified auxiliary interpreters.

East Boston Neighborhood Health Center partners with Bunker Hill Community College, Jewish Vocational Services, and World Education to train medical and clerical assistants to become auxiliary medical interpreters, responding to the needs of the center's multicultural community. The center established the Education and Training Institute as an "on ramp" to higher education for frontline employees who may have had poor experiences with school and be hesitant to step foot on a college campus. Without leaving the health center, they register for and take classes in medical interpretation. Precollege English and math classes also are available to employees who lack the basic skills to be accepted into interpreter training program or other credential or degree programs. Employees practice newly acquired interpretative skills in a work setting.

TENDERLOIN HEALTH

Tenderloin Health, in partnership with City College of San Francisco, trained frontline staff to become certified community health workers in order to improve staff retention and quality of care provided to an HIV-positive client base. The partners

Frontline workers targeted for training opportunities

- Frontline community health workers

Outcomes

- 9 employees have earned Community Health Worker Certificates; another 3 are on track to obtain certificates.

developed a hybrid model of instruction, including online coursework, traditional classroom instruction, specialized training by Tenderloin Health staff and outside professionals, and supervised internships. The two-semester, seventeen-credit-hour program incorporated instruction on basic skills, soft skills, Microsoft Word, and health education courses. It also provided participants with a range of supportive services, including academic and vocational counseling. Supervisors were trained as job coaches and mentors. The program culminated in a Community Health Worker Certificate, which enabled some of the participants to advance to higher-earning positions.

However, the economic recession took a major toll on Tenderloin Health, and its involvement in *Jobs to Careers* ended in the wake of funding cuts and a resulting loss of staff capacity. Employees participating in the project continued their studies at City College of San Francisco, which will lead to Community Health Worker Certificates.

WAIANAЕ COAST COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH CENTER

Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center partnered with Leeward Community College to establish work-based learning opportunities for medical receptionists and medical assistants to improve their job performance. Frontline workers participated in work-based learning and college classes covering word processing, medical office procedures, medical terminology, electronic medical records, quality and performance, health and safety, business



Frontline staff learning about Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center's electronic medical record system

Frontline workers targeted for training opportunities

- Medical receptionists
- Medical assistants
- Team office managers

Outcomes

- 44 workers completed the program and received certificates of completion and college credit.
- 18 workers also completed an additional business computer systems course.
- 10 team office managers received training to become preceptors and improve their supervisory skills.

services, computers, and customer service. Those who completed the training received 14 college credits that they could apply toward an Associate's degree in business technology. They also received raises—up to 10 percent—and took on greater responsibilities at work.

The program also prepared team office managers to become preceptors and teach frontline employees on the job and in the classroom. The office managers received guidance on how to be more effective as supervisors.

Next Steps

Since 2006, *Jobs to Careers* has demonstrated what works—and what is needed—for transforming the skills and careers of frontline workers. Community health centers 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 participate, please contact Grace Ausick, 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 community health centers and in 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

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.

Future, the National Program Office for *Jobs to Careers*, 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.

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