



December 7, 2008

Workers tapped to train for higher-paying jobs

Initiative puts students into fields with high demand

By Mike Boyer
mboyer@enquirer.com

Single mom Mary White, 29, of East Walnut Hills tried college several years ago but found it too difficult to pay the cost of tuition while working at the Greyhound bus terminal downtown.

But White, who has worked as a patient attendant at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center for four years, is back attending Cincinnati State Technical and Community College and working toward an associate's degree in respiratory therapy.

It's a new chance for a career and better pay. Her patient attendant job pays about \$12 an hour, but if she completes her training and obtains her degree she could earn \$25 or more an hour in respiratory therapy.

"I love kids," said White, who has an 11-year-old son. "This is right up my alley."

She's part of a unique 4-year-old career pathways collaborative by health care and educational institutions and community agencies that could become a model for work force retraining efforts in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky and across Ohio.

The Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati grew out of a chronic need for skilled health-care workers at Cincinnati Children's and the Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati hospitals. At the same time, the hospitals realized they had a ready pool of loyal, lower-paid workers who, with some help, could be trained to fill the higher-skilled positions, said Bill Lecher, senior clinical director at Cincinnati Children's.

Regional planning efforts such as Go Cincinnati, Agenda 360 and Vision 2015 "have identified work force development as an area where we've got to do a better job," said Ross Meyer, executive director of the recently formed Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network, a partnership of local nonprofits, government agencies, employers and educational institutions to improve the coordination between skills workers have and the skills employers' need.

With a recent \$450,000 matching grant from the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, the local work force network is embarking on a three-year effort to expand the collaborative's approach of combining school work and steps to better-paying jobs.

"Employers have a hard time finding the skilled workers they need," said Meyer. "And too many workers lack the skills they need to get a good job. There's a mismatch between the skills people have and what employers demand."

It's not for lack of funding, he said. There are plenty of resources from local vocational-ed schools, work force investment boards, public agencies and ad hoc efforts by business.

"Some do a great job." said Meyer. "But there's a lack of coordination."

Talking about improving worker retraining when hundreds, if not thousands, of area jobs are being eliminated by the deepening global recession might seem a contradiction, but Meyer said work force training is a chronic issue with larger implications for the region's economic future.

"Even in hard economic times, with companies facing record unemployment, they have a hard time finding the skilled workers they need," he said.

The local problem isn't unique; it's also a national issue. The U.S Department of Labor estimates a shortage of more than 10 million skilled workers by 2012. But it's even more critical in the Cincinnati area because the population here is growing more slowly than the nation as a whole, fewer younger workers choose to stay here and the existing labor force is older than the national average.

With little population growth and an aging work force, employers are increasingly going to have to look to the area's existing labor force to fill job slots.

Ohio Lt. Gov. Lee Fisher, in a recent interview, said the state is aware of the challenge for the region and the state as a whole.

"There is no question that you need to focus first and foremost on the work force you have and give training possibilities for those not employed as well as employed," said Fisher, who also is the state's development department director. "The idea is that we train people who do not have jobs, but also train people when they do. This helps keep companies competitive."

Health workers wanted

Started four years ago to ease occupational shortages in health care, the Health Careers Collaborative has already shown some impressive results. Some 1,400 low-income or unemployed people have received certificate training ranging from two to eight weeks to prepare them for jobs paying \$10-\$12 an hour as nursing assistants and patient care assistants in hospitals.

Another 110 workers in the health facilities, like Mary White, have begun working on associate's degrees in one of four career paths leading to jobs paying \$20 or more an hour.

The collaborative's main sponsors are Cincinnati Children's, the Health Alliance, Great Oaks Institute of Technology & Career Development and Cincinnati State.

Lecher, the collaborative chairman, said one of the main barriers to workers pursuing college degrees was the cost of tuition.

"It's hard for someone making \$10 an hour to come up with \$800 for tuition at Cincinnati State," he said. In the past, all hospitals only reimbursed the tuition. The solution was for the hospital to prepay the tuition for those in the pathways program.

Another innovation was a "cohort approach" where 20-30 employees in one of the four associate degree programs: nursing, surgical technology, respiratory care or multi-competency health, go to classes together, often offsite near Cincinnati Children's at the Health Alliance offices on Burnet Avenue.

"We're like a big family," says Mary White.

Jamilah Hackworth., a grants administrator at Cincinnati State who works with students in the collaborative, said the school has tailored courses to meet their needs.

Clifton-based Cincinnati State is using more online courses for the students and tailoring the heavy

math-science components to their needs.

For example, instead of teaching math and then chemistry separately, the school has tailored its math courses to the concepts necessary for the chemistry courses the students are taking.

"It gives them an opportunity to apply what they've learned," Hackworth said.

Although the first students in the associate-degree program won't graduate for another year, Lecher said their results have been impressive.

The group's average grade point is 3.25, and retention in the program approaches 90 percent, about three times that of Cincinnati State overall.

Other skilled-worker needs

Harry Snyder, regional coordinator for Ohio Jobs Skills Bank in Southwest Ohio, an Ohio Department of Development initiative to improve the work force development approach, says Ohio wants to expand the career pathways to other industries anticipating high demand.

"The key is if there's not a job (at the end), it doesn't work," he said. Putting existing employees on the path to better paying jobs helps employer turnover.

"There's a loyalty by employees to their employer," he said.

The work force network's Meyer concedes the recession "is a major issue we're dealing with." The difficult economy has slowed the network's effort to raise the total \$1.8 million locally to complete the national grant.

But he said the group is moving forward with plans to identify two other industry sectors to focus on to develop programs.

"There's really no optimum time to begin," he said. "But if we begin now we'll be in a better position to develop the skills needed when the economy rebounds."
