

The Los Angeles Healthcare Workforce Development Program

From Workforce & Economic Development Program's WED News.

Every workday, as he has for the last 13 years, Donte Huddleston drives from his home in Compton to report to duty as a custodian in Los Angeles County's cash-strapped public healthcare system. It was through his work on the wards—cleaning restrooms, stripping floors, delivering supplies—that Donte became inspired by the work of the County's nurses, and decided to pursue a career as an operating room nurse. So, in addition to his work and family responsibilities, the 34-year old African American father and de facto coach attends classes three times a week at El Camino College's registered nursing program, studying pathophysiology, pharmacology, disease processes and the essentials of bedside care. That he has the time and energy to dedicate to such an endeavor is a testament to precisely the type of individual who has chosen to dedicate their career to serving the County's poor and uninsured, for in addition to raising their own three school-age children he and his wife have recently obtained custody of his sisters 9-year old daughter and toddler twin boys.

Donte Huddleston is but one of a hundred clerks, custodians, nursing attendants and others participating in nursing programs sponsored by the Los Angeles Healthcare Workforce Development Program (HCWDP). The initiative, a labor-management training partnership of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 660 and the Los Angeles Department of Health Services (DHS or 'County'), trains incumbent workers into occupations that are critically short-staffed within the restructuring healthcare system, affording them the opportunity to achieve economic and career mobility.

In a climate where colleges and vocational schools are forced to turn away applicants in droves, HCWDP has leveraged its resources to ensure that DHS workers who are interested in nursing and allied health careers can access evening and weekend courses in part on County time. And while community colleges must stretch their faculty and resources to accommodate these workers, they are happy to do so (another cohort of 75 to 100 will be entering into nursing programs next term). Their instructors and deans report them to be among the most dedicated and mission-driven students they've ever had. This is despite their competing responsibilities and status as 'non-traditional' learners. That the program reports little attrition is largely due to the level of supportive services built into it. Members not only receive support from the program itself—in the form of short English, Math, test-taking and study skills courses offered prior to entry and ongoing tutoring, and 24/7 mentoring and coaching once workers are enrolled—but also from one another.

Motivated by its current successes, HCWDP is forging ahead with plans to address the larger nursing shortage by training a cohort of nurses into nurse faculty positions who, in turn, would train new RNs. In addition to offering career ladder opportunities in nursing and medical records (the program has graduated 59 coders and is currently entering into negotiations with East Los Angeles College to train another cohort), HCWDP plans to offer members the opportunity to become radiology and ultrasound technicians, respiratory therapists, occupational therapists and assistants, and healthcare IT professionals. And while the current emphasis is on the incumbent workforce, the hope is that the Worker Education and Resource Center (WERC)—the non-profit 501(c)(3) created by SEIU 660 to jointly oversee HCWDP—will one day expand these opportunities to the children of its members, so that they, too, can receive support and begin to prepare for good jobs within the healthcare industry while still in high school.

In addition to specific career-track training programs, the program which is now entering its fourth year has implemented a number of training initiatives that either are (a) linked to specific goals of the 1115 Medicaid Waiver to create efficiencies and increase revenue within the Department (by emphasizing healthcare access, quality standardized care, and recouping costs) or (b) directly avert or lessen the impact of layoffs by providing incumbent workers with the opportunity to hone their existing skills and acquire new ones. Portable skills trainings include courses on customer service; IT, computer, and clerical skills; Spanish language training; and communications. To date, the program has reached out to over 8,000 workers. Whether they take advantage of a two-day communications class, a twelve-week computer class, or an 18 to 24 month academic or vocational program, HCWDP is touching workers lives, and hopefully, indirectly, those of the patients.

Workers enrolled in allied health and nursing programs find that juggling work, school, and family responsibilities is no small feat, as Huddleston is the first to admit “the only thing that I have time left for is my son’s sport practice two times a week,” however the payoff is considerable. Not only can workers expect their career possibilities and earnings to expand—in Donte’s case to more than double his current salary after passing his state Board exam—but they go to work everyday with the confidence of knowing they are applying their new-found expertise to help serve those most in need.