

Pioneer Employer Hospitals: Investing in Frontline Workers

Case Study: Advocate Lutheran General Hospital

Advocate Lutheran General Hospital

Advocate Lutheran General Hospital (ALGH) is a 638-bed teaching hospital and one of the largest hospitals in the Chicago area. The hospital is part of Oak Brook-based Advocate Health Care, which is the largest health care provider in Illinois, and has 30,000 employees on staff and 6,000 medical staff members. The hospital has been awarded the American Nurses Credentialing Center's prestigious Magnet designation and has been recognized 11 times as one of the 100 Top Hospitals by Thomson Reuters National Benchmarks for Success study.



ALGH has worked with Catalyst Learning and area community colleges to develop classes for frontline workers that address both community and organizational workforce needs. The comprehensive educational programs available through Advocate for frontline healthcare workers exemplify their commitment to improving the healthcare workforce in their community and illustrate the benefits of investing in frontline workers. These programs enable incumbent workers to access education and improve their careers in nursing or health care.

HOW IT ALL GOT STARTED

Advocate Lutheran General Hospital has a long history of commitment to being an “employer of choice” and helping employees’ advance their careers. In the last decade, ALGH has expanded its efforts to help frontline workers advance their careers. Like many hospitals and health systems across the country, Advocate began to experience shortages in nursing and other positions in the 1990s. Turnover among frontline positions was high and language barriers prevented the promotion of frontline workers into vacant midlevel positions. In response, ALGH began developing programs to provide educational and career development for frontline workers.

“Advocate is a continual learning organization. Whether it’s on-the-job learning, whether it’s using tuition reimbursement to help you with your learning or education, we are constantly in what I would call learning mode. That is why I saw a need to grow and develop frontline workers.” Penny Pilarczyk (Vice President for Human Resources)

The first program for frontline workers offered by ALGH, implemented in the early 2000s, was an English as a Second Language course. It was popular with both employees and managers, who appreciated their employees improved communication skills. Since then, they have expanded the offerings for frontline workers at ALGH and linked them to career opportunities.

HOW IT WORKS

English as a Second Language. Implemented in 2003, ALGH began offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes on-site free of charge for employees. Multiple class times were available to accommodate the varied schedules of workers, with courses led by instructors from area community colleges. Some workers who have taken ESL courses have used the coursework to advance their careers and education. For example, one ESL participant who started in environmental services is now enrolled in a local community college and working as a mid-level administrative staff member at ALGH. Others take ESL classes for personal reasons; for example, one worker enrolled so that he would be able to help his son with his homework. Either way, administrators feel that offering these classes improves workers communication skills and overall job satisfaction and commitment.

ESL Quick Facts	
Number of employees participating	30
Retention rate	99%
Number promoted	1 (16% wage increase)
Number enrolled in community college course work	2

School at Work. From 2006-2010, ALGH began to expand the course offerings available to frontline healthcare workers by implementing the School at Work (SAW) program. Developed by Catalyst Learning, School at Work prepares entry-level healthcare workers for career advancement and enrolment in local community colleges and technical schools. Advocate’s SAW program focused on two classes: Introduction to Healthcare and Becoming a Healthcare Professional. Participants also worked with instructors to identify and achieve personal goals through career planning and customized self-assessments. Over an eight month period, the classes and career planning were offered on-site. SAW supported students through both coursework and career planning with a combination of on-site coaching and an on-line service, Career Care. Workers complete online modules and then follow-up with ALGH’s training specialist for one-on-one discussion and planning.

SAW Quick Facts	
Number of employees participating	41
Retention rate	92%
Number promoted	15 (16% wage increase)
Number enrolled in community college coursework	8

College Success. While School at Work was a successful program, ALGH began looking for a more cost effective and faster way to help workers become college ready. In 2010, ALGH partnered with Oakton Community College to offer a College Success course to interested frontline employees. The College Success course covers topics such as what to expect in college, how to apply, and important skills such as how to use an online library. The course is delivered onsite and workers receive paid educational release time to attend. Participants receive 3 credits once they complete. The goal of the College Success course is to create a bridge between frontline employees and the community college. The College Success course intentionally creates a cohort of individuals who complete it and then go on to enrol in the pre-requisites necessary to enter formal degree programs. So far, one cohort of eight students has taken the course. ALGH leaders intend to increase the size of future cohorts.

WORKER SPOTLIGHT

Hasiba Zahirovic works in the patient transportation department at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital. Prior to coming to ALGH she had been working at a grocery store; however, she knew she wanted to work in an environment where she could move up. When a position became available in housekeeping she gladly took the job. Hasiba has taken both English as a Second Language courses and School at Work courses, where she improved her math, literacy, typing and computer skills. After completing the classes she moved from the housekeeping department to her current job in patient transportation. She is ultimately interested in becoming an ultrasound technician.

Incumbent Worker Training Program. ALGH also provides a program for incumbent workers for current or potential patient registrars. The program is a joint effort by ALGH, the local workforce investment board, and Oakton Community College. Oakton provides an instructor to teach the courses onsite. This instructor tailors the computer, insurance and medical terminology classes to meet the needs of the hospital. Once participants complete the coursework, they will be prepared to successfully perform the tasks associated with the patient registrar position. All ten employees who participated in the program completed the training. Seventy percent of these workers are still employed at ALGH and 20% have since received promotions (into registrar positions).

Tuition Assistance. Six percent of frontline workers take advantage of ALGH's tuition assistance programs. ALGH has two ways to access tuition assistance. The first tuition assistance program is Accelerating Careers through Education (ACE). The ACE program targets individuals interested in pursuing careers in one of four tracks: Nursing (ADN, BSN, or MSN), Health Information Technology, Respiratory Therapy, and Diagnostic Imaging. The ACE program provides 100% tuition reimbursement for individuals enrolled in these degree programs. Workers must have been an employee for at least one year to be eligible.

Employees can also access the Education Assistance Program, which provides monies for any educational coursework. Employees who work 40 hours or more per pay period (pay period is two weeks) are eligible to receive reimbursement for courses. Part-time employees receive \$1,200 per year; Full-time employees receive \$4,000 per year.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

Advocate Lutheran General Hospital has been successful at developing the basic skills of its entry-level workers. As lack of educational readiness is often a persistent barrier to career advancement for frontline health care workers, support for basic skills development is critical to future career advancement. Through ALGH's varied offerings, many participating workers have begun to advance in their careers. Further, retention of these workers is very high. These successes result from thoughtful planning and strategic implementation of the program. Below, the critical success factors that facilitate the success of their training programs are listed.

Culture of Learning

Key informants maintain that the frontline worker development programs ALGH provides align with the mission and values of the organization: compassion, excellence, stewardship, and partnership. Many managers and administrators have risen through the ranks so they have first-hand experience with what it means to "grow your own." In the years 2010 and 2011, ALGH filled open leadership positions internally 76% and 64% of the time respectively. This impressive proportion of internal hires demonstrates the success of their approaches for "growing their own" to date and the strength of their culture of learning. Several of the managers interviewed for this report had completed their degrees while employed by ALGH. Because of their personal experiences, these managers were eager to also help their employees take advantage of the career opportunities at ALGH. Further, the long tenure of many managers at ALGH reflects the organization's dedication to helping workers move up within the organization and pursue a career path that they enjoy.

*What I have noted is that a lot of the associates that had language barriers would shy away from doing something different. They wanted jobs that didn't take any skills, but [since taking an ESL course] we now have people that want to move up.
- James Ng (Human Resources Manager)*

Dedicated HR Training Specialist

Having a single point of contact is vital to successfully managing all of the extensive logistics and communication involved in developing and implementing multiple training programs. Sarita Mannigel, HR training specialist, serves in this role. In addition to coordinating the training programs described above, Sarita also conducts new worker orientation, develops curriculum, and provides career guidance and support to participating workers. Workers seeking advancement can schedule an appointment with Sarita to work through a series of assignments designed to identify their needs, interests, and skills. Based on their results, Sarita works with the individual to construct a customized plan (e.g., relevant education, training, available jobs,

etc.) to help workers pursue and achieve their goals. Frontline workers who want to pursue additional training or move up within the organization seek her out for advice and guidance.

WORKER SPOTLIGHT

Elzbieta Jedryzcka began her career at ALGH in the housekeeping department. She had been a nurse in Yugoslavia, but after moving to the United States she struggled with language barriers. At the encouragement of her manager, she enrolled in both School at Work and English as a Second Language classes, which she really enjoyed. She stated, "At first I didn't know what to expect, but when I started I found myself excited to have books in my hand. We have a teacher who was all the time with us, every step of the way, and it was for me something special. I love it, and I think it helped me to find another job." She said that she was initially not interested in moving up within the organization, but after completing the classes she began to want to explore other career options. She now works in the medical supplies department and is considering her next career move.

Angela Ghazale started working in the cafeteria at ALGH in 2003. She wanted to move up within the hospital, so she enrolled in English as a Second Language courses. With her improved communication skills she was able to move into the medical records department, where she is a document imaging processor. Angela was very grateful for the opportunity to move up within the hospital and pleased with her improved communication skills.

Development strategies tailored to the needs of low-wage adult learners

Frontline workers face many challenges to achieving education and career advancement. The programs and policies described above (particularly the ESL course, on-site classes, tuition assistance, and educational release time) remove many of these barriers. The understanding and sensitivity to the unique needs of low-wage adult learners further removes barriers to participation. Sarita Mannigel designed the curriculum to be culturally sensitive, given the high population of racial/ethnic minorities and immigrants occupying frontline positions. Sarita also explicitly addressed a common, and sometimes debilitating, barrier for adult learners - education anxiety. For example, she organized a tour of the local community college to help workers become more comfortable and less anxious about navigating the educational system. Participating workers commented on how supportive and helpful Sarita is, and referred co-workers to her who could benefit from similar assistance. Attention to the unique needs of adult learners represents further support for frontline workers attempting to advance their careers.

Supportive Leadership

The leadership at ALGH has a history of supporting frontline workers and promoting internal promotion within the organization. For example, the Vice President for Human Resources, Penny Pilarczyk, talked about her personal career path as part of her motivation for working to develop more formal career resources for frontline workers. When she started working for the organization as a manager she did not have her bachelor's degree. With the support of ALGH,

she later obtained it, and recently completed her master's degree as well. The leadership at ALGH clearly has fostered a culture of frontline worker development and promotion within the organization; the programs that they have developed over the last decade help formalize the process of frontline worker advancement.

Supervisor/Manager Support

Administrators noted that gaining supervisor support has been a challenge at times. The courses are usually designed to be attended at the end of a shift, so participants complete half of the course during work time and half on their own time. The organization has worked hard to demonstrate to managers and supervisors that ultimately their departments benefit from these investments. Some strategies key informants identified to engage frontline supervisors include: involving FLW managers as part of the education process, communicating regularly via progress reports, identifying the potential benefits of the program for managers, and sharing attribution for program successes with managers as appropriate.

Celebrating Accomplishments

The HR Training Specialist at ALGH thinks that is important to celebrate the accomplishments of frontline workers that pursue additional training. For example, the organization throws a party at the completion of every ESL or School at Work class, Administrators attend, and many workers invite their family members. Demonstrating that the organization supports and recognizes the workers' accomplishments encourages them to undertake additional training.

Strong Partnerships

Several of the programs ALGH provides are implemented with the help of other organizations. For example, ALGH works with Catalyst Learning for SAW and Career Care. The bridge program and the registrar/intake trainings are provided by Oakton Community College. Harper College serves as a partner to ALGH for the onsite ESL program. Without the flexibility and buy-in from these organizations it would be difficult for the hospital to achieve the scope and depth of success it has achieved. Further, partnering with local organizations pools resources to increase returns on investment, with reduced burden on any one partner.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Advocate Lutheran General Hospital invests \$1,000,000 of the hospital's budget into the tuition assistance programs, \$30,000 per year for the ESL and SAW programs, and pays .65 FTE salary for the training specialist. External grant funds help support the Bridge and incumbent worker training programs. All hospital staff interviewed agreed that the investment is money well spent and urge leaders to continue funding each budget year. The outcomes achieved for the workers and the hospital provide the justification and rationale to continue providing formal (e.g., financial, HR policies) and informal (e.g., schedule accommodations) for the program. Below are the most salient returns on the investment for the hospital.

Retention

Providing a career ladder for workers helps ALGH to retain valued employees. Retention amongst program participants is exceptional (92-99%). ALGH has the lowest turnover within the Advocate Healthcare System (6.16% overall). Also, many of the managers and workers interviewed as part of this case study had been employed at ALGH for 10+ years. Key informants believe that the career development programs the hospital offers is a key contributor to such strong retention.

Lower Vacancy Rates

ALGH no longer has problem with vacancies or shortages in frontline worker positions. Current vacancy and turnover rates hover around 2% and 7% respectively. While this is also a result of current economic conditions, the frontline worker programs have helped to alleviate vacancies and turnover in positions that had been a challenge for ALGH.

High worker satisfaction

ALGH ranks in the 90th percentile for employee satisfaction (as rated by Reuter's). ALGH employee comments echo this statistic. Managers and frontline workers consistently reported that they were very happy at ALGH, and their long tenures with the organization reflected their high level of commitment to their employer. They expressed appreciation for the support that ALGH had provided in helping them advance their careers and a high level of satisfaction with their employer's policies and practices.

Improvements to Care Delivery

Supervisors, managers and administrators all noted that workers who have participated in online courses have greater confidence and improved skills in their positions. Supervisors and managers noted that workers who took English as a Second Language classes interacted with patients, co-workers and managers much more. As stated by manager David Uchman, "To me the best outcome of any of these programs really is confidence and improvement in their communication."

Leadership

Administrators noted that they consistently see graduates move into a higher level of professional responsibility in their work environment. They become either formal or informal practice leaders in their environments and contribute at a higher level through a better understanding and appreciation of what it means to be a clinical leader.

NEXT STEPS

ALGH remains committed to developing the careers of frontline workers. The hospital plans to further its existing efforts at career development and skills acquisition by partnering with National Louis University to facilitate credit-for-prior learning for frontline workers. NLU offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in 60 disciplines in the disciplines of education, human services, business and the arts and sciences. NLU serves 11,000 students across 5 campuses in the Chicago area, three others nationwide, and a business school in Poland. National Louis University is an accredited private university that specializes in innovative student-centered education for diverse working adults. The University has portfolio and testing mechanisms to award college credit for skills and knowledge learned through work experience. ALGH leaders view this potential partnership as beneficial to helping workers accelerate completion of degree programs and to helping the hospital spend less money on tuition assistance. National Louis University is also an ideal partner given their extensive experience with adult learners and their hybrid models of course delivery.

ALGH's support for frontline worker development is on-going. The ESL and other classes have provided tangible benefits for workers, managers, and ultimately patients. As stated by David Uchman, Director of Patient Support Services, **"Ultimately our goal is to create this service excellence, and you can focus on physicians, you can focus on the clinical piece of it. But there's still a whole kind of underbelly of the organization that has an integral role in the patient's perception of what they think the facility is all about. A lot of times it's the first impression or the last impression, and my associates many times are involved in that."** ALGH deeply recognizes that quality improvement requires investment in workers at all levels of the organization.