

# Pioneer Employer Hospitals: Investing in Frontline Workers

## Case Study: Bassett Medical Center

### BASSETT MEDICAL CENTER

Less than half a mile from the Baseball Hall of Fame, Bassett Medical Center is a 180-bed acute care Magnet hospital in Cooperstown, New York. The hospital is the flagship institution for the Bassett Healthcare Network, an integrated health care system that provides care and services to people living in an eight county region covering 5,600 square miles in upstate New York. Focused on integrating research and teaching with high quality care, Bassett Medical Center is a leader in rural health care and the largest employer in the area. Under the pioneering leadership of Dr. William Streck and the supportive operational leadership of Dr. Bertine C. McKenna (Chief Operations Officer), Bassett has developed strong partnerships with local educational institutions – Hartwick College and State University of New York-Delhi – to address both community and organizational needs. The Partnership for Nursing Opportunities program exemplifies this pioneering spirit and illustrates the benefits of investing in frontline workers. This program enables both incumbent workers and community members to access education and ultimately engage in a career in nursing.

### HOW IT ALL GOT STARTED

Cooperstown is a small village situated at the mouth of the Susquehanna River in upstate New York. Hundreds of thousands of baseball enthusiasts and other tourists flock to the area during the summer months, yet Cooperstown has experienced substantial out-migration (about 30%) of young residents (18-30 year olds) over the last few decades. This out-migration is largely due to the rural character of the area (the town only has one stoplight) and has made it increasingly difficult for the hospital to recruit and retain qualified health care workers. High turnover in the frontline positions and shortages in the nursing positions threatened to undermine the hospital's commitment to meeting the needs of the community through high quality care.

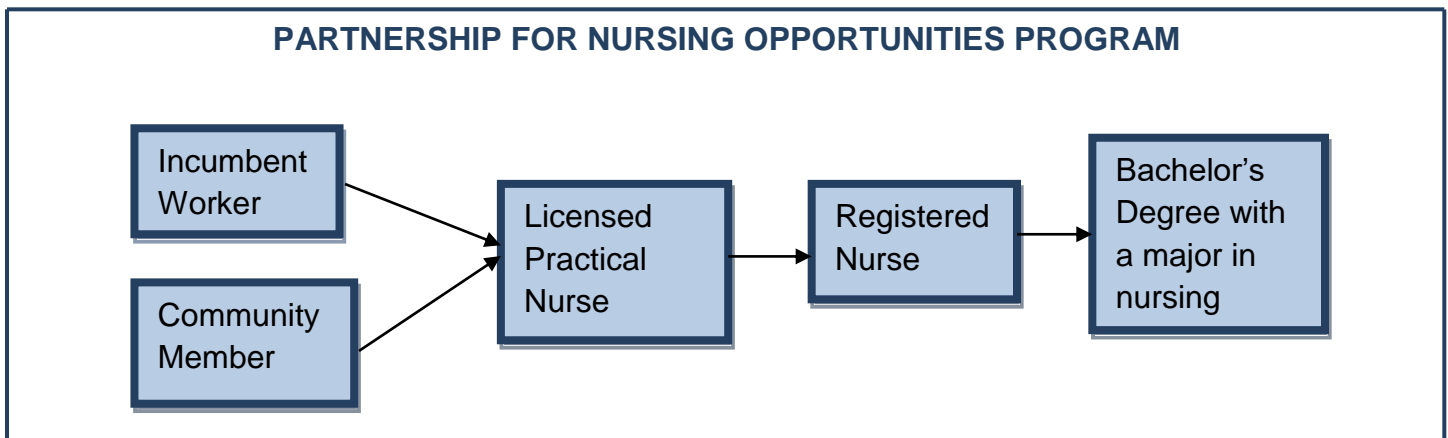
*“This Partnership for Nursing Opportunities program is a wonderful, wonderful pipeline program which allows us to attract and retain staff, and improve the quality of care by helping keep local people here and providing them a really good educational opportunity to either get into the nursing field or to pursue ongoing education.” – Martha Twitchell, Manager, Nurse Education*

Bassett attempted several strategies aimed at addressing these issues (e.g., recruiting high school students to do job shadowing); however, convincing young locals that nursing was a viable and lucrative career path was difficult given their perception that little opportunities existed in the area. Seeking a more innovative and creative solution, the CEO reached out to area colleges as a way of constructing an effective strategy. At the time, the State University of New York-Delhi was looking to expand its Licensed Practical Nursing program into an Associate Degree Nursing program. Another local university, Hartwick College, was looking to bolster a faltering Baccalaureate Nursing program. Administrators from both educational institutions collaborated with the leadership at Bassett Medical Center to devise a strategy that would meet the needs of all three

institutions. As the CEO puts it, “We all came together and I just said, ‘We’re just going to do this.’ And we did it in about four months.” In 2001, the Partnership for Nursing Opportunities Program was launched.

## HOW IT WORKS

The Partnership for Nursing Opportunities Program sponsors individuals interested in pursuing nursing careers. There are two main components to the program. The first component involves supporting individuals as they pursue an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN). Incumbent workers (mostly nursing assistants and clerical staff) and community members (e.g., recent high school graduates, dislocated workers) apply to enter the ADN program at SUNY-Delhi. Applicants submit recommendation letters and complete an interview. For community members, this application process also involves applying to work at Bassett and being screened according to Bassett human resource hiring policies.



If accepted, Bassett provides tuition reimbursement for the student for the first year and flexible employment (e.g., schedule accommodations) as participants move through coursework. After two semesters, participants are eligible to take the National Council Licensure Exam (NCLEX) and receive licensure as an LPN. Once licensure is achieved, participants work as LPNs as they complete the second year of the ADN program.

### WORKER SPOTLIGHT

Patricia Prime has been working at Bassett since 1997. When she first heard about the PNO program, she was working in registration as a coder. Married with three children, Patricia was hesitant about heading back to school. Like most workers in frontline positions, adding school to existing work and family responsibilities seemed daunting. After some reflection, however, she and her husband decided that it was a good opportunity and that they would make it work. Shortly thereafter, Patricia applied and was admitted to the nursing program.

Supervisors worked with her schedule so that she could accommodate classes as well as study time. She spent a few months taking prerequisite courses at night while working full time during the day. Once the prerequisites were complete, she entered the LPN program taking classes during the day and working at night. After reaching the LPN milestone, she worked 3 days a week and every other weekend while she completed the RN coursework. Patricia admits that navigating school, work, and personal life was grueling at times, but well worth it given the achievements she gained at completion.

Transitioning from a clerical to clinical role in the hospital gave her “a whole new outlook” on healthcare. It also gave her a new wardrobe – she has traded in her dress clothes and high heels for scrubs. Currently an RN, Patricia is an RN on the Medicine unit and is happy to report that “she loves working here.”

Individuals who are already LPNs begin the PNO program at this stage (after completing any necessary prerequisites), entering the SUNY-Delhi ADN program as a third semester nursing student. Bassett provides tuition advancement for the second year of the ADN program and accommodates the rigorous coursework by allowing workers to drop down to .4FTE while retaining their benefits. Once participants complete the ADN program, they move into RN positions at Bassett.

The second component of the PNO program involves helping Registered Nurses (RNs) obtain their Bachelor's Degree with a major in Nursing (BS). Interested incumbent registered nurses enroll in the RN to BS program at Hartwick College. They also receive tuition assistance and flexible scheduling, as well as laptops to support their movement through this coursework. Graduates of the BSN program are eligible to move up the internal RN clinical ladder developed by Bassett. This clinical career ladder incentivizes and rewards nurses who pursue continuing education, specialty certifications, and leadership roles in the organization. Movement up the ladder is tied, in part, to education credits. Thus, Hartwick graduates progress up the ladder more quickly than those not pursuing the BSN. Each step up the ladder is associated with an 8% salary increase (4 levels total).

#### WORKER SPOTLIGHT

Brenda Sierra, a hemodialysis nurse in an outpatient clinic, is typical of most frontline workers at Bassett. She is originally from the area, but lived in a few different places before deciding to return to Cooperstown to be near family. Brenda has worked in several other health care jobs before her employment at Bassett, including a nurses' aide job in a nursing home and a LPN job in another hospital. When she first heard about the PNO program, Brenda was interested right away. Coworkers who had been through the program and her friends and family encouraged her to take advantage of the opportunity.

With the support and encouragement from family and friends and the mentoring and support from her supervisor, Brenda entered the ADN program. Three days a week were devoted to classes; Mondays were clinical days, Tuesdays and Wednesdays were didactic instruction (two classes on each day). Thursday, Friday, and Saturday she worked at the hospital. Brenda had "Sundays off to herself."

Brenda has plans to enter the Hartwick BSN program in the near future. But for right now, she is enjoying her work. The PNO program "was the most intriguing, best thing [she] has ever done in [her] life".

All participants have access to career coaching from hospital staff and advisors from the colleges. Hospital staff provide the day-to-day support participants need such as help with stress management and navigating the educational systems, while classroom and clinical instructors often tutor workers onsite outside of official class or clinical time. All workers who receive tuition assistance are contractually bound to remain employed at the hospital one year for every year of tuition assistance received.

#### CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

The Partnership for Nursing Opportunity program has been extremely successful at grooming low-wage incumbent workers, recent high school graduates, and dislocated workers for careers in nursing. Since beginning the program in 2001, eighty-seven individuals have matriculated through the Associates Degree Program to become RNs. The ADN program completion is high (about 80%) and most workers fulfill their service obligations (75%). Forty Bassett RNs have earned a bachelor's degree with a major in nursing from

Hartwick College. This success results from thoughtful planning and strategic implementation of the program. Below, the critical success factors that facilitate the success of the PNO program are listed.

### Culture of Learning

Employees at all levels of the organization simply believe in the value of education to the organization. Many managers and administrators have risen through the ranks so they have firsthand experience with what it means to “grow your own.” Further, the small town atmosphere permeates the workers’ expectations for how people should be treated in the workplace. They expect the workplace to have a personal and supportive character and they are willing to be a part of creating that environment.

*“As a learning organization, we are committed to the development and advancement of our staff. Education has been one of the three tenets of Bassett’s mission so the PNO program is a natural fit to meet our mission while providing excellent patient care.”*

– Bertine C. McKenna, PhD,  
Chief Operations Officer

### Supervisor Involvement

Project staff enlisted the involvement of supervisors in many aspects of the PNO program. Supervisors serve on the selection committee during the application process, ensuring that participants are a good fit for the department/unit, not just the hospital and the nursing program. For enrolled participants, supervisors also provided flexible scheduling (e.g., making sure that work schedules did not interfere with attending class and allowing workers to take days off to study for exams when needed).

### Strong Partnerships with Local Colleges

Strong relationships with both partnering colleges are integral to the success of the program. Executive level staff at Bassett work with executive level staff at Hartwick College and SUNY-Delhi to ensure that all organizations’ needs are being met through the partnership. Program staff capitalize on the pre-existing relationships between the institutions to facilitate the development, implementation, and continued success of the program.

*“We can deliver students to the program. They can deliver program content and degrees.”*

- Bruce Wilhelm, Vice  
President of Human  
Resources

### Progressive Human Resource Policies

The availability of tuition assistance (in addition to the funds set aside specifically for those at the LPN to RN and RN to BS stages of the PNO program) to all employees – not just professional staff – reduces the financial barriers for workers needing to cover pre-requisites or the first year of the nursing program. To reduce the staffing challenges for departmental managers who accommodated participants’ part-time and flexible schedules, PNO participants’ salaries are housed under a transitional cost center independent from the departments’ staffing budgets. Committing workers to only .4FTE while still providing benefits not only helps student workers navigate work, family, and education more successfully, it also sidesteps the common challenge to working part time – lack of benefits.

### Full-time Coordinator

Dedicating a full-time position, filled by Patricia Davis, RN, BSN, to coordinate all the moving parts involved in this program has been crucial. Patricia acts as coach, mentor and coordinator for the program. She recruits participants, advocates for and mentors individuals once enrolled, and keeps the program on track and moving forward.

## RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Bassett invests \$175,000 of the hospital's budget into the PNO program. External grant funds supplement this expenditure. All hospital staff interviewed agreed that the investment is money well spent and continuously advocated to ensure 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.

### Employer of Choice

Individuals who have completed the program recommend it to others at the hospital and in the general community, which ensures a steady stream of interested individuals. Project staff even get calls from parents and grandparents hoping to get their children into the program. This word of mouth advertising cuts down on recruitment costs for the organization.

### Lower Turnover

The turnover rate for PNO graduates (4.5%) is half of the turnover rate for RNs overall (8.9%). The CNO, Connie Jastremski, notes that ***"The easiest sell is the retention of the students that we put through the program...if it costs \$80,000 to turnover one nurse and I've been able to retain 75% of the 80 nurses that we sent to this program, I think I've more than paid for the program. And that's exactly the bottom line to my CFO every year."***

### Lower Vacancy Rates

Bassett no longer has shortages in the nursing positions. In fact, this last graduating cohort created a surplus in graduate nurses. Considering that the Bassett Medical Center continues to expand and the hospital intends to continue to support the program, this surplus was happily absorbed into the hospital by creating new positions through a unique program called "Nurse Ahead." Nurse Ahead allows for hiring in anticipation of historical vacancy trends.

### Community Development

The sizable raises associated with moving into the LPN and RN positions have improved the financial stability of the workers who have gone through the program and their families. Workers also receive psychological rewards in the form of confidence and self-esteem. Thus, the PNO program ***"fill[s] our needs but it's also filling a community need to have people engaged, staying, working in the community."*** – Connie Jastremski, CNO

### High worker satisfaction

Bassett consistently receives high scores on its annual employee satisfaction surveys. Project staff believe that this is due, in large part, to their ability to offer programs such as the PNO program as a benefit to workers.

## Increased Productivity

Because participants work as LPNs while they complete the RN program, workers have more familiarity with hospital policies, procedures, and culture when they enter the RN positions. This familiarity sometimes reduces the time it takes workers to become acclimated to their jobs, and thus cuts down on orientation (from 3 months to 2) and on-ramping costs. Speaking of graduates' ability to integrate quickly, Sara Albright, Director of Talent and Learning notes: ***"In addition to having ten nurses, we have ten nurses who already know the organization, who already know the culture and the values and the expectations and the different units. So it's almost like having ten five-year employees."***

## Strengthened Integration of Education and Practice

The strong partnership between Bassett and the colleges afforded Bassett greater input into the colleges' nursing curriculum. Project staff work with administrators at the colleges to strengthen the curriculum and the training that students receive in order to improve the quality of graduating nurses. For example, Bassett nurse administrators advocated for an increased emphasis in the curriculum on critical thinking skills. These skills enhance nursing assessment – a critical component of high quality care.

## Improvements to Care Delivery

Students who are in the BS program at Hartwick are required to do a class project that targets continuous quality of care improvement. PNO participants choose to implement their projects in the hospital. For example, one BS student is working on a research project to compare the medical error rates of nurses who have participated in the PNO program to nurses who have not. Students continue to be involved with these projects after graduation (e.g., serving on committees dedicated to addressing the subject of the project), institutionalizing these initiatives into care delivery.

## NEXT STEPS

The PNO program will be graduating its 100<sup>th</sup> participant next year. Looking towards the future, the CEO envisions the benefits of doing this with other occupations such as medical technologists, radiology technicians, and respiratory therapists. Any positions experiencing shortages or where succession planning is needed would be amenable to a similar program according to project staff. Currently, the hospital has difficulty filling nurse leadership and management positions. Therefore, pipeline programs for Master's and Ph.D. level degrees in nursing are currently being developed with the SUNY Institute for Technology. These programs will help to meet the hospital's need as well as give PNO graduates further potential for career and education advancement. In the meantime, Bassett will continue to provide the PNO program to interested individuals and to nurture the education and career development of all staff. As Bruce Wilhelm (Vice President of Human Resources) puts it: ***"If you want to get ahead, we're gonna do our darndest to try to support you to do that. And if this doesn't work, let us know what else might work."*** – Bruce Wilhelm