

Pioneer Employer Hospitals: Investing in Frontline Workers

Case Study: Group Health Cooperative

Group Health Cooperative

Group Health provides medical coverage and care to nearly 700,000 residents in Washington. Started in 1947 as a community coalition dedicated to making quality health care available and affordable, Group Health continues to be run by a Board of Trustees composed of health-plan members elected by other members. They operate one hospital, 25 primary medical centers, and six additional specialty clinics. Group Health has developed strong partnerships with local educational institutions and community organizations – Seattle Pacific University, Renton Technical/Community College, North Seattle Community College, and SEIU 1199 NW – to address both community and organizational workforce needs. The comprehensive nurse training programs available through Group Health exemplify their commitment to the healthcare workforce and illustrate the benefits of investing in frontline workers. These programs enable incumbent workers to access education and ultimately engage in a career in nursing or health care.



Bellevue Group Health Medical Center

HOW IT ALL GOT STARTED

Group Health Cooperative has a long history of commitment to being an “employer of choice” and helping employees’ advance their careers. In the last decade, Group Health has expanded its efforts to develop career ladders that enable frontline workers to move into nursing. Group Health providers began to experience a shortage of nurses in the 2000s like many other healthcare organizations across the country. Many of their older nurses were retiring, and they were having trouble attracting younger nurses to fill vacant positions. In response, Group Health began collaborating with local educational institutions to provide opportunities for their workers to have greater access to nursing degree programs.

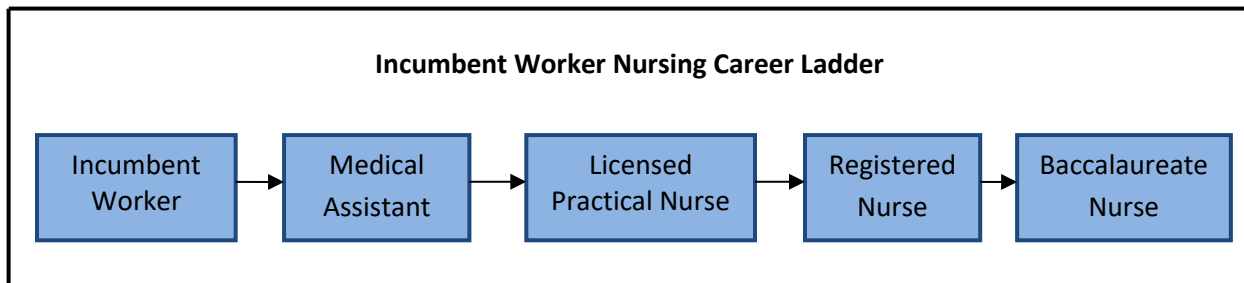
“I feel that training is first and foremost in that you build the foundation of that individual. There’s nobody out there who doesn’t want to work. It’s just that they weren’t given the right tools to be successful, and a lot of it is taking the time to make sure that they’ve been granted the time to grow and learn.” Ardis Goulart, RN, BSN

(Clinical Operations Manager, Primary Care Travel Group)

The first nurse training program implemented by Group Health was a partnership with a local university that allowed Registered Nurses (RNs) to earn their Bachelors of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree. Group Health provides care for many patients with complex health needs, and as a result, administrators felt that they needed a larger cadre of baccalaureate nurses. The BSN program has now been in place for over twenty years and is very successful. More recently, Group Health has partnered with a community college to support an online Medical Assistant (MA) training program and a training program for MAs to become Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs). These programs were implemented in an effort to reduce turnover in this workforce and create opportunity for career progression.

HOW IT WORKS

Over the last several years, Group Health has provided training programs for individuals at all levels for their nursing career ladder, which is summarized below.



Online Medical Assistant (MA) training. Group Health partnered with North Seattle Community College to enroll workers in a Medical Assistant certificate program. The project was supported by a King County Workforce Funding Collaborative grant received by North Seattle Community College. Most of the workers who did this program started off in non-clinical positions. The coursework was primarily online, but they met once a week on Sundays for their labs and completed a clinical rotation at the end of the program. The program was free to the individuals who enrolled. Through this grant, Group Health learned a great deal about the supports necessary to help frontline workers complete education for successive jobs.

MA to LPN training program. Group Health partnered with Renton Technical College to provide training for a cohort of MAs to become LPNs. They recruited both current Group Health employees and community members for the program. Fourteen participants completed MA to LPN programs with tuition and paid time support, and many of the community participants were hired by Group Health after completing the program. The fact that Group Health employs LPNs, which is atypical for most ambulatory care staffing models, is critical to creating a feasible career ladder with a base at the Medical Assistant level. The path to achieving a Registered Nursing degree can be long and difficult for frontline workers. The LPN credential and employment provides both meaningful advancement as well as a morale-boosting milestone along the way. This training program was supported by a grant and is no longer funded; however, Group Health still provides tuition assistance for workers wanting to become an LPN.

MA to LPN program Quick Facts	
Total # of participants	14
Completion rate	100%
Currently working as LPN at Group Health	6
Currently working as RN at Group Health	1

LPN to RN training program. Group Health does not have a formal cohort-based training program for LPNs to become RNs. However, they do provide tuition support, flexible scheduling, and health insurance for part-time workers, which has allowed many of their workers to complete RN training. Since 2007, 42 staff completed LPN to RN programs at a variety of community colleges. Lower Columbia College provides online training with intensive in-person clinical coursework, which has been particularly well-suited to the needs of Group Health workers.

RN to BSN training program. As mentioned above, the RN to BSN training program in partnership with Seattle Pacific University has been in place for over twenty years and has been highly successful in helping workers obtain their BSN, and in many cases, move into leadership positions within the organization. Group Health funds 75% to 100% (based on FTE) of the tuition for that program, and the program is tailored for the working professionals. Students meet for class once a week at the Group Health facility.

The program is open to both GHC RNs as well as those in the community. The RN to BSN program supports both the organizational and national goals to increase the number and percent of baccalaureate prepared RNs in the workforce. The increasingly complex needs of the aging population require a better educated workforce in nursing. The Institute of Medicine’s “Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health” report calls for 80% of RNs to be BSN prepared by 2020. Currently 51% of Group Health’s RN workforce is BSN prepared. This dual focus on internal and community workforce development has the potential to impact not only the level of care provided but also the economic and educational development goals for the community.

WORKER SPOTLIGHT

Lynda Sager, a Clinical Operations Manager, started working at Group Health eight years ago as a diploma nurse. She enrolled in the RN to BSN training program at Seattle Pacific University available through Group Health and was able to get her degree in two years. Group Health covered between 75% and 100% of her tuition costs for the BSN degree. She then enrolled in a master’s program in health care administration at the University of Washington, which she recently finished. Between the BSN and MSN training, Lynda has developed strong critical thinking and leadership skills and is a valuable asset to the care team.

RN to BS program Quick Facts	
Total # of participants	178*
Graduation rate	83%
# of Group Health Graduates	115
% of Group Health Graduates still working at Group Health	45%**

**28 students are still currently enrolled*

*** Program has been in existence for 20 years. Some of the attrition is due to retirements.*

Career development opportunities

In addition to the formal degree programs that Group Health has implemented in partnership with educational institutions, Group Health also has an internal career development program that is targeted to frontline staff. The program began in 2007 with a grant from the Group Health foundation that was targeting diversity in leadership. Originally, the program focused on leadership development; over time, however, the goals of the program expanded and evolved to focus more on providing employees with the skills needed to successfully manage and navigate their careers.

Managers nominate frontline workers who they believe have high potential to move up in their careers (sometimes interested frontline workers ask their managers to nominate them). Nominated employees are then required to complete an essay detailing why they are interested in the program and what they hope to get out of it. Senior leaders, managers, and human resource staff select the individuals who will participate in the program.

The career development program runs twice a year and lasts six months. Participants attend class one day a month, complete online assignments, and perform workplace learning activities. Upon completion of the program, participants are matched with mentors (for 3-6 months) who continue to provide guidance and support to workers as they execute their career development plans.

Two hundred fifty workers have participated in the career development program. Of the 250 participants in the program, 215 (86%) completed the program and 45 (18%) have entered manager roles. About twenty-five percent of participants enter new roles within Group Health between 6 and 12 months after completing the program.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

Group Health has been successful at grooming low-wage incumbent workers and dislocated workers for careers in nursing. Since 2003, fourteen Medical Assistants have trained to become LPNs, and forty-two LPNs have matriculated through the Associates Degree Program to become RNs. In addition, 100 employees received funding to complete prerequisite courses needed to enter a nursing program. About 50% of these employees have entered nursing programs. This

success results from thoughtful planning, improving supports for workers seeking advancement, and strategic implementation of the program. The critical success factors that facilitate the success of their training programs are listed below.

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 first-hand experience with what it means to “grow your own.” For example, two managers interviewed for this report had completed the RN to BSN program and then had gone on to obtain master’s degrees in public health administration. Because of their personal experiences, these managers were eager to also help their employees take advantage of the career opportunities at Group Health. Further, the long tenure of many managers at Group Health reflects the organization’s dedication to helping workers move up within the organization and pursue a career path that they enjoy.

“It was one of the best things that ever happened to me as far as making me a well-rounded person, coming back with more leadership skills, [not] just more assessment skills. I mean you know you go and you think you know everything and then you go and then you really find out that it’s a bigger world than what you are really living in. It’s really exciting.”

- Participant (RN to BSN)

Supervisor Support

For workers who are enrolled in the nurse training programs, supervisors have 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) and try to allow workers to reduce their hours as needed to accommodate the demands of classes. Administrators have also worked to foster a flexible work environment for employees, sometimes having one-on-one conversations with supervisors to ensure that they provided scheduling flexibility and let workers decrease their FTE while in the programs if necessary.

Comprehensive Coverage

One of the strengths of Group Health’s nurse training programs is the comprehensive career ladder it has provided for workers interested in a career in nursing. Workers with minimal training have been given substantial support to first train for an LPN degree and then an RN degree in the form of tuition assistance and flexible scheduling. For those who are interested in pursuing education even beyond an RN degree, Group Health continues to offer tuition assistance for obtaining a master’s degree.

“I’ve talked with many of them and they say, oh, I’m not stopping here. You get them going and you know they want to keep going.”

- Roger Walker, Analyst, Nursing Operations

Strong Partnerships with Local Colleges

Group Health has worked closely with North Seattle Community College (SPSCC), Seattle Pacific University and the University of Washington, to provide a comprehensive nursing career ladder

for workers. These arrangements benefit Group Health and the educational institutions: Group Health provides financial assistance, faculty and clinical support, and students for the educational institutions, while the educational institutions provide the workforce development needed by Group Health. Administrators at Group Health talked in particular about their close relationships with local community colleges, noting that they have been very flexible in meeting the needs of Group Health and that both partners often call on each other to partner on grant-funding opportunities.

Progressive Human Resource Policies

The availability of tuition assistance 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. Non-represented employees have access to up to \$1,500 per year in tuition assistance. Represented groups vary by contract, but RNs in grad school have up to \$4,000 available in tuition assistance while the service workers group has up to \$5250 through the union contract. In some cases tuition assistance requires a two-year return of service. Group Health also allows students to maintain benefits at .45FTE or .5FTE (depending on the occupation of the worker), which 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.

Inclusive work environment

Group Health has several employee resource groups for women and minorities. A women’s leadership forum was started over a year ago and aims to provide networking opportunities within the organization and mentoring for women working at Group Health. There is also a minority employee resource group that includes employees from multiple underrepresented

WORKER SPOTLIGHT

Leslee Thompson had been a MA in the physical therapy department for 20 years when she decided to start the MA to LPN program in 2002. She felt that she could do it at that point because her daughter was older (starting high school), allowing her more time for attending class. The program took two years to complete, and the classes were at night and all day on Saturday. After completing the program she received a wage increase and more responsibility. She has a high satisfaction with her work and feels like she is a leader and important to the care team.

Stephanie Moss was a participant in the RN to BSN program, having been a nurse for 32 years before entering the program. She worked during the day and went to school at night once a week for 4 hours, and it took her 3 years to complete. She described the program as “one of the best things that ever happened to me.” She gained leadership skills, more perspective on patient care, better memo writing, and satisfaction from moving up a step; in addition, she talked about knowing that Group Health was behind her which made her much more committed to the organization.

race/ethnicity groups and a newly formed lesbian, gay, and transsexual employee resource group. Given that women and minorities are overrepresented amongst frontline occupations, strategies aimed specifically at targeting women and minorities demonstrate the insight of Group Health’s leadership. Creating an inclusive work environment likely facilitates trust and buy-in amongst potential program participants.

Staff Dedicated to Nurse Education

Administrators at Group Health noted that developing training programs with educational institutions requires extensive communication between partners. Coordination of communication is needed with organization administrators, with the students, and with the managers of participating workers. The extensive communication needed to make a program successful was a reason that administrators identified having a single point of contact as a critical success factor. There needed to be a point person who could coordinate all the programs and logistics within each program.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Group Health invests \$331,000 of the organization’s budget into their nurse training programs. External grant funds (King County Workforce Funding Collaborative, ARRA Health Grant, Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County) supplement this expenditure. All Group Health staff interviewed agreed that the investment is money well spent and staff regularly advocate for funding in each budget year. The outcomes achieved for the workers and the organization provide the justification and rationale to continue providing formal (e.g., financial, HR policies) and informal (e.g., schedule accommodations) supports for the program. Below are the most salient returns on the investment for the organization.

LPN Turnover Rates		
Year	Group Health Cooperative	Washington state average
2008	10.9%	18%
2009	6.4%	7.8%

MA Turnover Rates		
Year	Group Health Cooperative	Washington state average
2008	13.3%	21.2%
2009	9.1%	10.7%

Retention

Providing a career ladder for workers helps Group Health to retain valued employees. Group Health has many employees with long tenure in the organization. This aspect of their workforce means they are retaining firm-specific knowledge within the organization. High retention rates also reduce the cost of recruiting and training new workers.

Lower Vacancy Rates

Group Health has been able to virtually eliminate long-standing vacancies. While the current economic downturn has likely influenced this, managers believe that the nurse training programs have helped to alleviate vacancies and turnover in nursing positions that had been a challenge for Group Health.

High worker satisfaction

Managers and frontline workers consistently reported that they were very happy at Group Health, and their long tenures with the organization reflected their high level of commitment to their employer. They expressed appreciation for the support that Group Health had provided in helping them advance their careers and a high level of satisfaction with their employer's policies and practices.

Increased Productivity

Because participants are Group Health employees while they complete the Medical Assistant, LPN, or RN program, workers have more familiarity with the organization's policies, procedures, and culture when they enter their respective positions. This familiarity sometimes reduces the time it takes workers to become acclimated to their jobs, and thus cuts down on orientation and on-boarding costs.

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. Many have also gone onto graduate school and now work as managers and administrators within the organization.

Improvements to Care Delivery

As workers have improved their skills and become leaders in their clinical areas, the organization benefits from improvements in care delivery. For example, Group Health has moved more and more towards using baccalaureate nurses, as patients' medical needs and treatments have become more complex. Providing supportive training in partnership with an educational institution has allowed Group Health to expand their BSN workforce.

NEXT STEPS

Many of the formal degree programs at Group Health are on-going. The RN to BSN partnership with Seattle Pacific University has been in place for over twenty years and is still going strong. The MA to LPN program was funded through a grant that is no longer funded, but Group Health still provides generous tuition assistance and progressive HR policies for workers who wish to pursue additional education. As Barbara Trehearne (VP for Nursing & Quality and Chief Nurse) stated, ***“The business case is based on doing what you believe is right for employees and what’s good for the organization. When you invest in the development of your employees, they will invest in you.”***