

Pioneer Employer Hospitals: Investing in Frontline Workers

Case Study: Providence St. Peter Hospital

Providence St. Peter Hospital

Located in Olympia, Washington, Providence St. Peter Hospital (PSPH) is a 390-bed (2400 employees), not-for-profit Magnet hospital providing a full range of primary and tertiary hospital services. The hospital is the largest institution in the Southwest Washington area run by Providence Health and Services, a not-for-profit Catholic health care ministry committed to providing for the needs of the communities it serves. The health system spans five states – Alaska, California, Montana, Oregon and Washington – with headquarters in Renton, Washington near Seattle. Providence St. Peter Hospital has developed strong partnerships with local educational institutions and community organizations – New Market Skills Center, South Puget Sound Community College, and University of Washington, Tacoma – to address both community and organizational workforce needs. The comprehensive nurse training programs available through PSPH exemplify its commitment to the healthcare workforce and illustrate the benefits of investing in frontline workers. This program enables both incumbent workers and local high school students to access education and ultimately engage in a career in nursing or health care.



HOW IT ALL GOT STARTED

Like many hospitals and health systems across the country, Providence St. Peter Hospital began to experience a shortage of nurses in the 2000s. With a wave of retirements and difficulty attracting younger nurses, PSPH was having a tough time filling vacant positions. The hospital averaged 89 RN vacancies in 2007, costing an estimated \$1.76 million. Further, many interested employees were having trouble getting into area nursing schools because of the growing demand for nursing education.

“We believe in education and giving our employees what they need to practice at a level that is the best for our patients and best for our staff. We retain them if they are happy, if they are striving, and if they are learning and growing. It provides our community with a hospital where we can take care of you with the best nurses and the best hospital possible.”

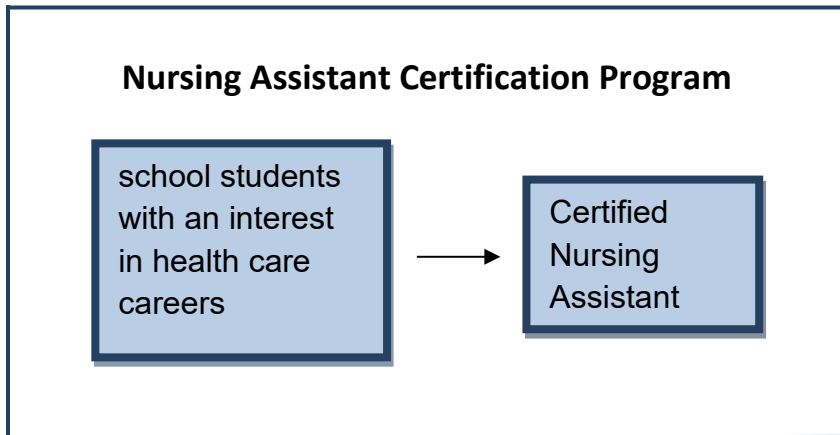
- Linda Montgomery, Former Director of Nursing Education, Practice and Research

During this same period of time, many hospitals, specifically those with Magnet designations, began to experience pressure to increase the percentage of their nursing staff with Bachelors of Nursing degrees (rather than Associate Degrees). In response, Providence St. Peter Hospital began collaborating with local educational institutions to provide opportunities for their workers to have greater access to nursing degree programs.

In the early 2000s, Providence St. Peter Hospital also began to expand access to health care occupational training to members of the community, specifically students at the local high school. They partnered with a community organization to go into the high school and start providing clinical nursing assistant training for students. Through this initiative, they hope to encourage young people to pursue careers in health care and consider the cost of the program an investment in the future health care workforce.

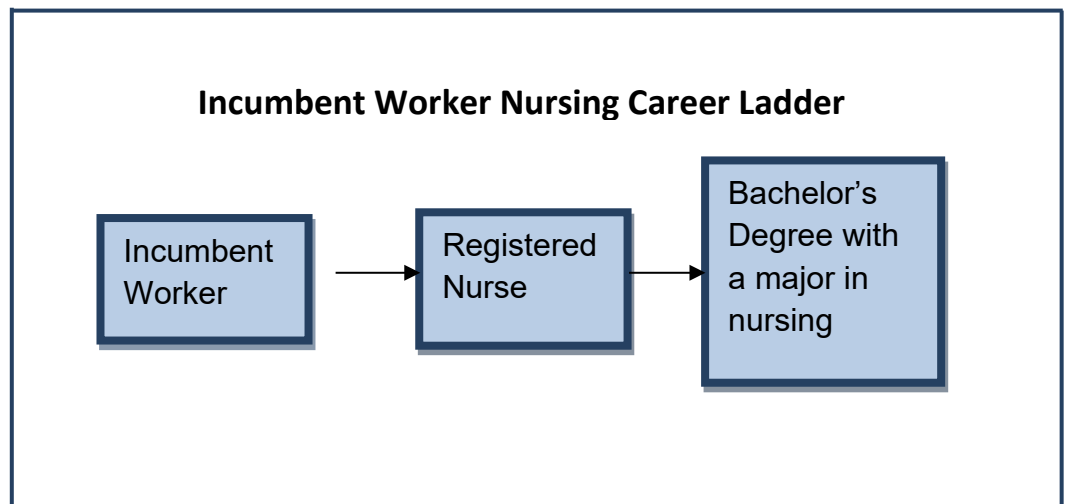
HOW IT WORKS

PSPH currently offers three pioneering workforce development programs. The first program involves a partnership with New Market Skills Center (a consortium of 25 high schools that provide career and technical training to high school students) to help students pursue a nursing assistant certification. Students complete a year-long course of study and 50 hours of clinical practice at PSPH. The students spend two days a week at the



hospital shadowing medical professionals, rotating through more than 20 different departments at PSPH. The students are then eligible to take the Washington State Certified Nursing Assistant Exam. While some of the students who take the course are primarily interested in careers as nursing assistants, most plan to attend college, and many want to be physicians. The program provides the students with training in basic patient care skills that apply to many medical occupations.

The second program involves a partnership with Capital Medical Center, another acute care hospital in the local community, and South Puget Sound Community College (SPSCC). Capital Medical Center and PSPH pay SPSCC to expand the slots available in their associate degree in nursing program (ADN) in exchange for guaranteeing slots for hospital employees who qualify for admission. Hospital employees who meet the standards for ADN admission are considered for one of the slots set aside for the two hospitals and do not have to compete for acceptance in the general applicant pool. The PSPH ADN program has sponsored 46 employees since 2006, sixty-five percent of whom completed the program. Of those who received their ADN, 83% are still employed at the hospital.



The third program involves a partnership with University of Washington, Tacoma and involves supporting interested ADN nurses to obtain a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN). All but 10 elective credits are taught onsite at the hospital. Employees attend class

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once a week or once every other week for three years (depending on the program), allowing them to work full-time or nearly full-time while completing their degree. The tuition assistance policies available at the hospital help to fund workers as they move through the BSN program.

WORKER SPOTLIGHT

Soledad Fratis had been a nursing assistant at Providence St. Peter Hospital for several years when her manager encouraged her to go back to school and pursue a nursing degree. She was initially discouraged because nursing programs are very competitive and she was not aware of Providence's supportive career advancement programs. When Soledad learned that she was able to apply for a slot in the South Puget Sound Community College nursing program through Providence St. Peter, she decided to go for it. She was admitted on her first try, and 80% of her educational costs (including textbooks and other course expenses) were covered by Providence St. Peter. Soledad recently completed the ADN program and has been working as an RN on the orthopaedic floor for the last 4 months. Soledad appreciated that Providence was willing to hire her immediately as a new nurse, noting that many places require some nursing experience before they will hire you as an RN. Currently, Soledad is in her first semester of an online BSN program. She expressed great appreciation for the investment that Providence St. Peter has made in her education, and she plans to continue advancing her career within the organization.

From a workforce planning perspective, there are definitely cost savings related to recruitment and retention of employees. Developing and retaining our staff is excellent stewardship of our resources from every perspective!

-Denise Marroni, Chief Financial Officer

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

Providence St. Peter Hospital's success at grooming high school students and low-wage incumbent workers for careers in nursing and other health occupations results from thoughtful planning and strategic implementation of the program. Below, the critical success factors for their training programs 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 first-hand experience with what it means to "grow your own." For example, two managers interviewed for this report had completed the LPN to ADN training program, continued on to the RN to BSN programs, and then gone on to obtain master's degrees in public health administration. Because of their personal experiences, these managers were eager to help their employees take advantage of the career opportunities at PSPH.

Supervisor Involvement

Project staff enlisted the involvement of supervisors in many aspects of the training programs at PSPH. For example, managers are often asked to allow themselves or their workers to be shadowed by participants of the nursing assistant training program. 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.

Comprehensive Coverage

One of the strengths of PSPH's nurse training programs is the comprehensive career ladder it provides for workers interested in a career in nursing. Workers with minimal training are given substantial support to first train for an ADN degree and then a BSN degree in the form of tuition assistance, on-site courses, and flexible scheduling. For those who are interested in pursuing education even beyond a BSN degree, PSPH continues to offer tuition assistance for obtaining a master's degree. Key informants estimated that 25 – 50% of workers in frontline positions, such as patient transportation and unit clerks, go on to receive advanced education either through the formal programs or by accessing tuition assistance.

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 BSN stages) 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. PSPH also allows students to maintain benefits at .5FTE, 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.

Cohort model

Employees participated in the RN program as a cohort. Many key informants felt that this model was beneficial to workers. Participants were taking classes with co-workers who could relate to the challenges of working and going to school. They provided emotional and social support for each other as well as help with homework and other school-related issues.

Caring Faculty

Several key informants talked about the high quality of instructors teaching in the nursing assistant and RN programs. They described instructors as effective, supportive, and willing to address life skills in addition to substantive coursework. For example, Judy Burchett, the instructor for the nursing assistant program, used active, problem-based and experiential learning to help students master the curriculum. She also integrated professionalism into the lessons, guiding students on how to be punctual, maintain a positive attitude, proper dress and grooming, etc. Key informants noted that students who ended up working at Providence demonstrated these valuable skills on the job.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

The CNA, ADN, and BS in nursing programs have resulted in several benefits for Providence St. Peter Hospital. Below are the most salient benefits identified.

It takes a while to polish [high school students] up a bit and teach them trust, respect, and communication skills, but I see so much potential in these students.

-Judy Burchett, New Market Skill Center Instructor

Retention

PSPH is able to retain employees through implementation of their career ladders. Many of the managers and workers interviewed as part of this case study had been employed at PSPH for 20+ years. The long tenure of these employees helps to retain firm-specific knowledge within the organization and reduces the cost of recruiting and training new workers.

Lower Vacancy Rates

PSPH no longer has shortages in the nursing positions. While this is also a result of current economic conditions, the nurse training programs have helped to alleviate vacancies in nursing positions that had been a challenge for PSPH to fill.

High worker satisfaction

Managers and frontline workers report high levels of job satisfaction. They feel appreciation for the career support that PSPH had provided and express satisfaction with their employer's policies and practices.

Increased Productivity

Because participants are hospital employees while they complete the RN program, workers have more familiarity with hospital policies, procedures, and culture when they enter the RN positions. This local organizational knowledge can reduce the time it takes workers to become familiar with their jobs, and cut down on orientation and on-boarding costs.

Strengthened Integration of Education and Practice

Key informants noted that graduates of the BS with a major in nursing program are more engaged employees. They are publishing articles and applying evidence-based research to their practice. In effect, these employees are exemplifying the positive impact of bachelor's prepared nurses in the clinical setting.

Improved recruitment

Providence St. Peter is phasing certified nursing assistants back into its care model over the next few years. Graduates of the nursing assistant program have expressed interest in working for the hospital (they typically enter long-term care work upon graduation), given these opportunities. By fostering the partnership with the New Market Skills Center, PSPH has created a reserve of eager and well-trained potential employees.

NEXT STEPS

Due to the economy and the ADN program's success, there is no longer a shortage in RNs. In fact, recent and future graduates of the ADN program will have a hard time entering nursing positions given the low vacancy

rates for RNs at the hospital. As such, PSPH has decided to discontinue its partnership with South Puget Sound Community College on the ADN program. Should the nursing shortage resume in the future, leadership may revisit this strategy once again, implementing important lessons learned such as rigorous selection and worker supports to achieve greater success.

In the meanwhile, the nursing assistant program is on-going and is likely to serve as an important resource to PSPH as it seeks to fill the CNA slots that will be created with changes in the delivery model. Further, the tuition assistance policies and the BSN program will continue to provide support to the many incumbent workers at PSPH interested in advancing their careers in health care.