

# Pioneer Employer Hospitals: Investing in Frontline Workers

## Case Study: Thompson Health



### THOMPSON HEALTH

Thompson Health is an integrated health care delivery system located in the Finger Lakes Region of upstate New York. The health system spans five affiliate health care organizations on several campuses in Ontario County and includes 300 physicians, 1,400 associates (employees), and over 400 community volunteers who provide high quality, comprehensive health care to more than 165,000 residents and their families in the Greater Finger Lakes Region. The health system has received several honors including the Governor's Award for Excellence by the Empire State Advantage Organization and Gold Certification with Distinction by New York State's Excellence at Work Program.



### HOW IT WAS ALL STARTED

Thompson Health is committed to bringing “*Confidence and compassion to every health care experience.*” Capable and committed workers at all levels of the organization are essential to fulfilling this mission. Yet, like many health care organizations, Thompson Health experiences staffing challenges associated with turnover and shortages. In particular, turnover is high among certified nursing assistants, phlebotomists, and non-clinical support services such as environmental services and nutrition. This high turnover frequently resulted in high vacancy rates, which overworked employees, lowered morale and compromised patient satisfaction. In response to the instability in key frontline positions, executive leadership and departmental managers created career advancement opportunities to improve retention.

*“There was a year we were going into the summer with five openings. So that was the real driving force. [I thought] We can’t exist like this.”*

Robin Kemp, Phlebotomy Coordinator

## HOW IT WORKS

Thompson Health offers onsite credentialing, departmental career ladders, and supportive human resource policies and practices to create advancement opportunities for frontline workers. These opportunities incentivize workers to stay, increase the skills and knowledge of frontline workers and create a culture of learning and development within the organization.

### ***Onsite Certified Nursing Assistant Training***

Thompson Health began offering in-house Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) training to interested individuals in the early 1990s. Subsequent staffing changes led to a decision by Thompson to pay for incoming and incumbent workers to enroll in the CNA program at Finger Lake Community College. While the college provided good training, Thompson needed a more frequent schedule for its personnel, and more assurance that trainees would return to its facility. In 2008, the Health System moved to conduct the CNA training onsite through one of its affiliates, the M.M. Ewing Continuing Care Center.

#### WORKER SPOTLIGHT

Two years ago, Elya O'Bryan decided that it was her calling to help people and that health care would be a good way of fulfilling this goal. She applied to several open positions at Thompson Health hoping to get her foot in the door. Elya ultimately landed a job in Environmental Services in August of 2009. Soon after she began working, Elya learned about the CNA program and applied as soon as she became eligible. Supported by her current and future managers and the course instructor, Elya successfully completed the program in July of 2010. She now works as a CNA in the Continuing Care Center and reports *"Honestly, I am happier than I've ever been."*

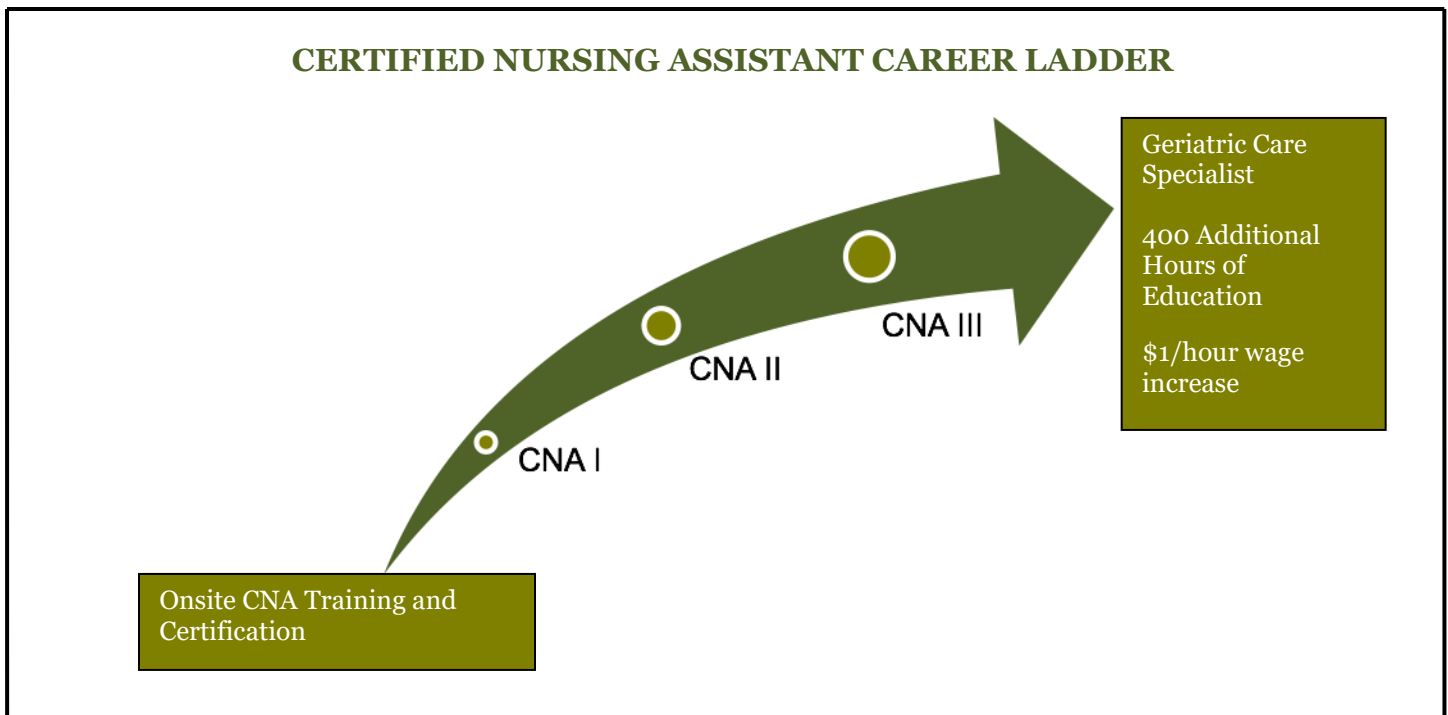
The Continuing Care Center is a not-for-profit residential health care facility offering quality skilled nursing, medical adult day health care and short-term care. It has 188 skilled nursing beds and serves up to 36 adult day health care registrants per day. Both incumbent and incoming workers are eligible to apply for the CNA training. Incumbents typically come from the department of environmental, laundry, and nutrition services; other applicants are often dislocated workers (due to downsizing or factory closings) with no background or experience in health care. The application process involves a job readiness assessment (WorkKeys®) and a pre-work screen to determine whether they can meet the physical demands required. If applicants pass both of these tests, they proceed to standard pre-employment screenings. Incoming workers must go through the hiring process (including fingerprinting, background checks, etc.) in addition to the selection process associated specifically with the training program. Once the screening process is complete, selected applicants work for pay as trainees while they complete the CNA training.

The CNA program uses the standardized curriculum for New York State and consists of 130 hours of training (about seventeen class days). To pass the course, participants must have 100% attendance and an overall course grade of 75 or above. After completing the course, participants are eligible to sit for the state certification exam, which is proctored onsite by an independent evaluator. This includes a written or oral test (for candidates that have a reading disability, marginal reading skills or English is their second language) along with a clinical skills exam where the candidates must demonstrate competence in performing three randomly selected skills in a classroom simulation. Participants who pass the exam receive their CNA certification through New York State Department of Health.

The Health System pays for the CNA to take the class, the class instructor, the certification exam, and the bi-annual re-certification fees. In return, participants must sign a commitment to work at the Continuing Care Center for at least one year. Fifty workers have participated in the CNA training since Thompson Health brought the program in-house in 2008. Participating workers receive \$8/hour while they are completing the training, \$9/hour once they pass their state certification exam, and \$10/hour once they have been employed as a CNA in the Continuing Care Center for six months.

### **Departmental Career Ladders**

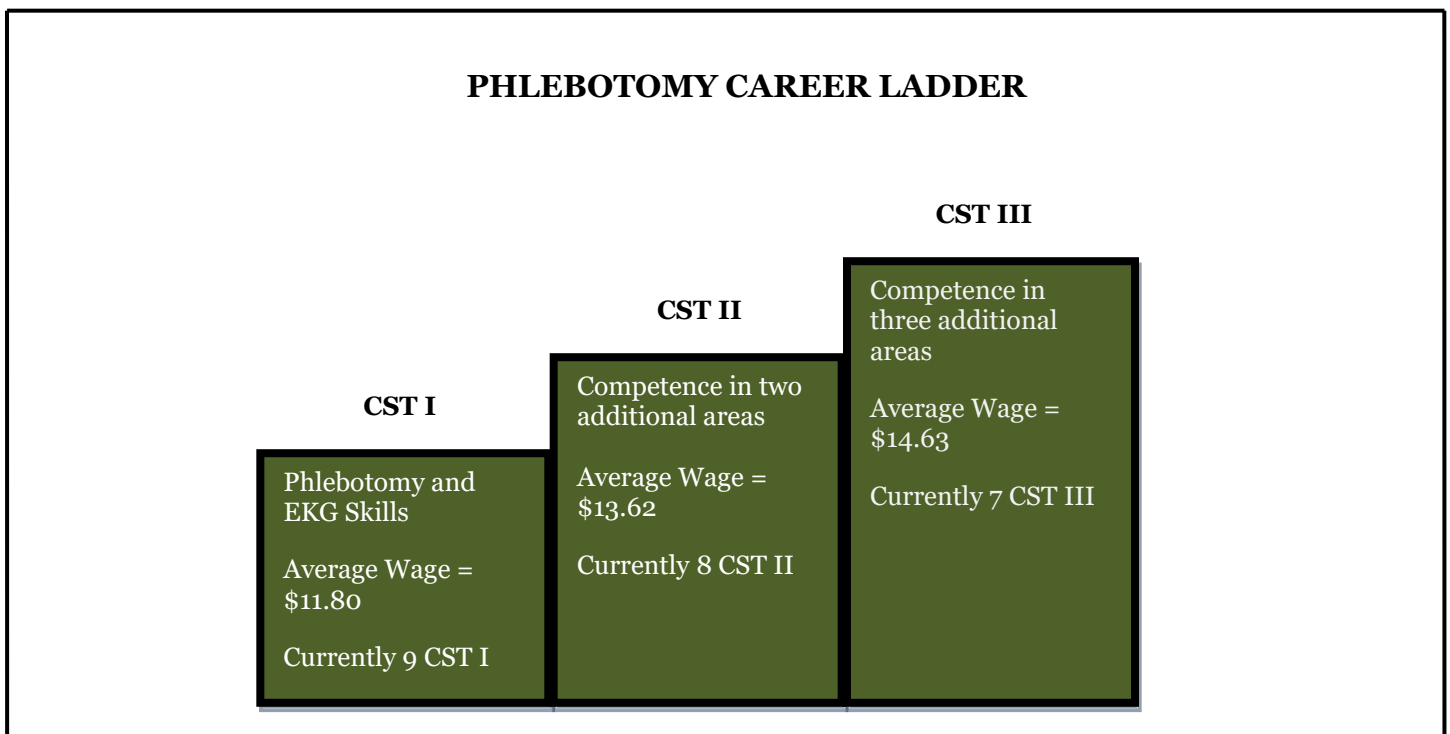
Several departments across the Health System are developing career ladders as part of their retention strategy. The Continuing Care Center, for example, has started development of a 4-tier career ladder for CNAs. Advancement is tied to increased education and is rewarded with small bonuses at each step. For example, a CNA I who is interested in progressing to CNA II must complete a 10-module education program and a teaching assignment. CNAs climbing the career ladder receive non-monetary rewards along the way to recognize their professional development activities and keep them engaged and moving forward with their professional development. The four tiers of the CNA ladder culminate with the Geriatric Care Specialist (GCS) designation. As a GCS, workers must have 400 hours of education in addition to the basic CNA training. Geriatric Care Specialists receive a \$1/hour pay increase. They also have greater responsibility on the avenues (units) such as involvement in the interview process and auditing.



The laboratory department at F.F. Thompson Hospital also has a career ladder. F.F. Thompson Hospital, one of Thompson Health System’s affiliates, is a 113-bed acute care community hospital with an ANCC Magnet designation. To address high turnover among phlebotomists and shortages in the medical technologist positions, the laboratory department at Thompson Hospital shifted the non-technical tasks being performed by licensed staff to phlebotomists. This redistribution of work activities freed up licensed staff to focus on technical responsibilities and serves as the basis for the phlebotomist career ladder.

The redistributed work tasks are grouped according to the five different areas within the laboratory department (two draw stations, the front desk area, homedraw services, and the main testing lab). Entry-level phlebotomists are responsible for phlebotomy and EKG tasks only. Phlebotomists who are interested in advancement may receive training on additional tasks associated with the different areas. For example, they may learn how to order lab work (a task associated with the front desk area). The additional training involves New York state designated competency checklists for laboratory work.

To advance, workers must demonstrate competency in the tasks associated with the 5 areas (2 additional areas for Level II and three additional areas for Level III). As workers move up the ladder, they receive a \$1/hour wage increase at each step. Once they achieve Level II or Level III, workers are eligible to move into a leadership role as a Phlebotomy Operations Person (POP). The POP serves as the go-to person on the shift, making sure there is coverage during lunches, distributing tasks appropriately, and managing workflow. POP assignments rotate and the assigned POP gets 5% charge pay while they are in this role.



*Note: Workers may receive wage increases for factors other than training*

### ***Supportive Human Resource Policies and Practices***

In addition to the CNA training program and the departmental career ladders, Thompson Health supports education and career advancement for frontline workers in other ways as well. Several workers who completed the onsite CNA training use the Health System’s tuition assistance to enroll in a Licensed Practical Nursing or Registered Nursing program. Workers are eligible to receive tuition reimbursement in the amount of \$3,000 per year if they are full-time and \$1,500 per year if they are part-time in exchange for agreeing to work at Thompson Health System for at least one year.

Thompson health also provides advancement opportunities for frontline workers by recruiting from within. In the departments of environmental, laundry, and nutrition services, for example, it is common practice to inform new hires that the hospital prioritizes internal hiring and promotion and to encourage employees to take advantage of advancement opportunities as they become available. Many departments across the Health System solicit candidates from this department and hire workers who have proven themselves as good employees. One department manager estimates that about 30% of his workers are promoted into other departments within the hospital. Movement into these jobs represents advancement for these workers; many workers hired into other departments within Thompson Hospital receive a wage increase of 20% or more.

### **CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS**

Thompson Health has achieved success in its efforts to grow and retain frontline workers. Since the onsite CNA training began in 2008, the program has served 11 incumbent and 39 external workers. Seven phlebotomist associates have achieved Level III designation in the lab department and eight have achieved Level II. Below, some of the critical success factors that have facilitated this success are listed.

#### ***Barrier reduction***

Several features of the CNA training program represent barrier reduction for trainees. For example, paying all the costs associated with the class including wages during the training means that workers can combine employment and education rather than add one on top of the other. This reduces the logistical challenges, time pressures, and financial burden associated with maintaining employment and going to school at the same time. Hosting the state certification exam onsite also reduces a common barrier to career advancement for frontline workers: education anxiety. Trainees take the exam in a familiar and comfortable space, thereby reducing anxiety and improving performance.

*“My job was going to school for the whole duration of the class. So I didn’t have to worry about working in another department on top of taking classes. It was just that. So I am all for them continuing to do it here.”*

Elya O’Bryan, Certified Nursing Assistant, Continuing Care Center

#### ***Comprehensive Screening Process***

All applicants for the CNA training program undergo a thorough screening process that is a collaborative effort between the Human Resources department, hiring managers on the avenues (units), departmental leadership and the course instructor. This comprehensive screening process ensures that the trainees are a good fit for the health system and the avenue, and are capable of being successful in the course.

### **Retention specialist**

JeanAnn Kubishin, the instructor for the CNA course, also serves as a retention specialist for the trainees. In addition to supporting workers' success in the class, JeanAnn also follows up with trainees regularly after they receive their certification and are working on the avenues. These follow-up meetings involve identifying and addressing any work-related problems the new CNAs may be experiencing as well as providing life coaching to workers on how to manage their lives outside of work so that it does not interfere with their work responsibilities. JeanAnn also works with managers on the avenues to continue to support CNAs' adjustment to the demands of the job. Several key informants noted that JeanAnn's efforts are a key reason why the program has been successful.

### **Preceptor training**

Thompson Health offers preceptor training to employees interested in serving in this role. Several of the senior phlebotomists in the lab department who train individuals interested in moving up that career ladder have taken this training. The training has proven beneficial in giving preceptors the skills and tools to tailor training to meet each individual's goals, learning styles, and skill sets.

## **RETURN ON INVESTMENT**

Investing in frontline workers has paid off for Thompson Health. Key informants across the Health system agreed that the programs, policies, and practices in place to grow frontline workers have had an impact on the following organizational outcomes.

### **Strong organizational commitment**

The key motivators for Thompson Health's recent efforts to develop frontline workers were high turnover and vacancies. While the volatility of the economic recession makes it difficult to conclusively assess whether these efforts have reduced turnover and vacancy rates, employee satisfaction survey results demonstrate that units with workers who have participated in the programs showcased in this case study report higher average organizational commitment than units without participating workers. Specifically, participating units scored higher on the question, "I would like to be working at Thompson Health 3 years from now."

*"The frontline workers touch our customers and we need to be confident that they're leaving our customer with the best quality care and the best customer service. And therefore we don't mind investing in assuring that."*

Jennifer DeVault, Vice President of Associate Services

### **Better equipped to respond to vacancies**

Now that the Continuing Care Center conducts the CNA course, they have more control over when it is offered. The class is now used to meet specific staffing needs. For example, the course runs when vacancies are high, rather than on a quarterly schedule as it was previously.

*"I tell people to apply here all the time. It's not a very good economy right now so people are looking for a job. I'm like, well look at Thompson. Look at Thompson. There might be something for you."*

Elya O'Bryan, Certified Nursing Assistant.

### **Improved recruitment**

The success of the onsite CNA training and the phlebotomy career ladder has improved recruitment for the Health System. Both the CNA training and the phlebotomy career ladder are in high demand. In fact, the Continuing Care Center receives 60-80

applications for every CNA class that runs and people often ask when the next class will be held in between offerings. Much of the advertising for positions in these departments now happens by word of mouth. Participants speak of their success to friends and family members, recommending that they apply for a job within the Health system. News of the phlebotomy career ladder has even attracted former workers back to the department.

2010 Employee Satisfaction Survey questions for which participating units' average score was significantly higher than non-participating units' average score	
Outcome	Survey Question
<b>STRONG ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT</b>	"I would like to be working at Thompson Health three years from now."
<b>HIGH PERCEIVED QUALITY OF CARE</b>	"Thompson Health provides high-quality care and service."
<b>COLLEGIAL PHYSICIAN/STAFF RELATIONSHIPS</b>	"Physicians and staff work well together."
<b>HIGH JOB SATISFACTION</b>	"Overall, I am a satisfied Associate."

***More competitive in the labor market***

Thompson Health faces competition for workers from several hospitals in nearby Rochester as well as a few large non-healthcare employers in the area. Creating opportunities for education and advancement helps the Health System be more competitive in attracting and retaining quality workers despite the fact that their pay is somewhat lower than other employers.

***High employee satisfaction***

Data from Thompson's 2010 Employee Satisfaction survey suggest that workers in the Laboratory department and in the Continuing Care Center appreciate and enjoy the availability of education and career opportunities. The departmental averages for these employees' responses to the question "Thompson Health provides career development opportunities" are above the Health system's overall average.

***Staffing flexibility***

The phlebotomy career ladder has created a pool of workers who are cross-trained in multiple tasks and areas. Managers now have more options and flexibility in assigning work schedules and dealing with staffing shortages. Before instituting the career ladder, licensed technologists filled in when staffing was low. Considering that medical technologists' salaries are three times that of phlebotomists, using phlebotomists rather than licensed staff to cover shortages saves money. Similarly, the Continuing Care Center has saved money by not having to use agencies to fill in for vacant positions.

*"We're in a competitive environment. We are rural so sometimes it's hard to get certified people to apply and our choices are limited. This way, we can pick the cream of the crop as far as we're concerned, as far as applicants, and put them through the training. So that's been beneficial to us."*

Kathy Vaughn, Vice President of Nursing, Continuing Care Center

**Quality improvement**

Lab department personnel report higher efficiency and productivity in the services they provide since the career ladder began. Workers who have climbed the ladder have a more holistic understanding of the lab's services and processes. This increased knowledge was instrumental in the success of a quality improvement project targeting patient wait times. Workers were able to map departmental processes and identify non-value added steps to eliminate. Since the streamlining, the lab has met its average wait time goal every month. Other quality improvements made possible by the cross training include: decreased blood culture contamination rates, decreased hemolyzed specimens, and improved customer satisfaction scores.

*“And I think you know in my opinion, the more people learn the more they become engaged in the business of your department, the better the department flows and the more efficiency you can build. And I think the department as a whole reaps the benefit.”*

Wendy Blakemore, Director of Laboratory Services

Participating units' ranking in the hospital for key 2010 Employee Satisfaction Survey questions		
Outcome	Survey Question(s)	# of participating units ranked in the top ten
<b>BETTER PREPARED WORKERS</b>	“I get the training I need to do a quality job.”	4
<b>STRONG ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT</b>	“I would stay with Thompson Health if offered a similar job elsewhere with slightly higher pay.”	2
<b>HIGH EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT</b>	“I feel empowered and comfortable to act on my own to make changes.” “I am involved in decisions that affect my work.”	4
<b>SUFFICIENT STAFFING</b>	“My department is adequately staffed.”	1 (Continuing care unit ranked #1)
<b>ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES</b>	“Thompson Health provides career development opportunities.”	2

*Note: There are 9 participating units and 79 total units in the hospital*



### **Molding ideal workers**

The CNA program serves as an extended orientation for workers. In addition to educating participants on the substantive content and skills necessary to be a good CNA, the program also reinforces the policies, practices, and philosophies of the Continuing Care Center. The instructor and the hiring managers on the avenues begin instilling the Thompson CARES values into trainees early on, molding workers in ways that is consistent with the organization's mission and values.

*“What we have here at Thompson Health is CARES values, which is **Commitment, Action, Respect, Excellence and Service**. As I’m teaching the C.N.A. program unit on dignity and respect of the resident, I can actually tie that right into our CARES values and the philosophy of Thompson Health. This becomes meaningful for the students’ basic learning but even more meaningful for Thompson Health.”*

JeanAnn Kubishin, Program Coordinator/Instructor for CNA training

*“So when you’re hearing it back from the doctors that’s when you know that things are good.”*

Phlebotomist Team Leader Robin Kemp

### **Increased physician satisfaction**

The improved efficiency in the lab department has increased the morale of not only patients, but doctors as well. Physicians have noticed and appreciated that the reduced wait times have increased patient satisfaction.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The CNA training continues to grow in popularity both internally and externally. In fact, several clinical departments across the Health system (e.g., physical therapy, recreation therapy, emergency room, and ICU) send their entry-level workers to the CNA training so that they can acquire these basic caregiving skills. These skills are essential for all positions in the organization and are particularly useful for incoming workers who have little or no background in health care. The phlebotomy training is expanding as well. The lab department recently received a Key Bank Grant to train acute care nurse aides to perform phlebotomy and become Patient Care Techs. Cross-training nurse aides in phlebotomy reduces foot traffic in patients’ rooms, improving patient satisfaction, efficiency and staffing flexibility. It also frees up the lab department phlebotomists to focus on increasing outpatient services and volumes, and gives acute care nurse aides another skill to add to their resumes.

*“I mean the staff are happier. Our turnover has been better. Our quality has improved. I’m seeing them making more and more improvements in general whether it be efficiency, productivity work or complete process redesign. I only see that continuing.”*

Wendy Blakemore, Director of Laboratory Services

In addition to creating and improving programs designed to meet organizational needs and goals, Thompson’s leadership recognizes that their successful workforce development efforts are also critical to meeting general health care workforce needs. Jennifer Devault, Vice President of Associate Services sits on Finger Lake’s Workforce Investment Board and is an active member in its Healthcare Workforce Alliance. Securing the quality and quantity of healthcare workers needed to meet the increasing demands of the aging population and health care reform is the main goal of the alliance. Thompson Health’s efforts to grow their own frontline workers and community members are a part of these ongoing coordinated efforts.