

Health Care Workforce Development Program

Worker Education & Resource Center, Los Angeles

If the program didn't exist, I wouldn't have been able to go to school, get my education, come back and get a job through the County, then give something back to the community. – Ricardo Sotomayor, RN

In 1995, a financial crisis at the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services resulted in the layoff of 2,500 healthcare workers. It also exposed the vulnerability of these workers, many of them women and people of color with limited education, skills, and financial resources, to fluctuations in funding and ongoing restructuring of the healthcare workforce.

In response, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 721 and the County developed a model labor-management educational partnership, the Health Care Workforce Development Program (HCWDP), and established the Worker Education & Resource Center (WERC) to implement it.

HCWDP offers training for existing L.A. County Department of Health Services workers who are represented by the union. In addition to basic skills, pre-requisites, and career path training, the program provides test prep and help with licensure as well as placement assistance. The program also provides coaching and counseling services, invaluable to many participants with limited educational attainment or those, such as women with families, facing additional pressures affecting their ability to complete training.

WERC functions as both a direct service provider and as a workforce intermediary, providing the planning, administration, and coordination of outside vendor services, such as courses provided by colleges in the Los Angeles Community College District.

"Where I was was in a really low-paying position that I was really struggling in, and now I'm in a position where I'm not rich, but I'm comfortable. It allowed me to be independent, to be supportive of myself and my family." --Monica Gipson, Coder

Between 2002 and 2008:

- Approximately 9,300 LACHDS employees took at least one course.
- Over 1,000 new professionals obtained degrees or credentials, including 249 new RNs.
- Career path graduates experienced substantial wage gains averaging approximately 20%, or between \$20,000 and \$40,000 annually.
- 88% of participants were minorities (in nursing: 31% African American, 24% Asian, and 33% Hispanic), increasing diversity of the health professions.
- 83% of participants were women, many of them single heads of households.

As an industry partner, the L.A. County Department of Health Services has also reaped benefits, both in quality and cultural appropriateness of care and in helping to address a critical shortage of nurses—decreasing the use of agency nurses and thereby reducing personnel costs.

HCWDP has also generated systemic changes that improve access to healthcare career pathways for all. Participating community colleges are standardizing pre-requisites to offer the same package of courses with articulation agreements that enable participants to carry credits from school to school.

In obtaining these results, HCWDP benefited from a regional Career Advancement Academy grant from the state Chancellor's office that shared the Program's basic skills curriculum, contextualized for healthcare, with local community colleges. A pending proposal at the Chancellor's office would provide support for providing a package of science pre-requisite courses for health care careers to the Program.

In addition, through L.A. Community College District bond funding, a new healthcare career pipeline satellite campus will concentrate preparatory courses on the site of the County's large hospital in East Los Angeles to ensure that more students from the L.A. County Department of Health Services workforce and the local community can access nursing and other allied health programs.

Diane Factor, WERC's founding Director, recommends continued funding through the community college system focused on industry sectors at the regional level and available to entities like WERC. She also recognizes an ongoing need for training geared to low-wage workers, who often find existing training options unsuitable or simply unavailable.