

State healthcare apprenticeship program adds skilled workers in Idaho hospitals

A healthcare apprenticeship program is helping Idaho hospitals obtain some of the skilled workers they need.

Similar to the software engineering apprenticeship program, the Idaho Hospital Association, in cooperation with the Department of Labor, provides Idaho employers with tools for apprenticeships, said John Russ, IDOL apprenticeship coordinator. For now, there are two healthcare programs, one for medical assistants and one for critical care nursing, he said.

The medical assistant internship program is operated through St. Luke's Health System, said Chris Southard, workforce registered nurse manager for St. Luke's ambulatory clinic, in Boise. Candidates join the program either from IDOL or an internal pool, and require either six months' prior experience as a certified nursing assistant or patient specialist, or six months of health experience, she said.

People are brought into the program as a medical-assistant-in-training, starting at about \$13 an hour, Southard said. After nine to 12 months of academic and on-the-job training, they are eligible to become a certified medical assistant, at which point they earn \$14.72 an hour, she said.

The program has 13 apprentices in the Treasure Valley, five in the Wood River Valley, and two in McCall, Southard said. Ideally, they would like to bring on 10 new apprentices every three months for a goal of 40 students, and they have a link on their job board for applicants to the July cohort of the program, she said.

"We did have some individuals who did not meet some of the pre-employment criteria or, post-hire, live up to our system values," Southard said. "We had to make some tough decisions there. We want them to follow the same standard as any St. Luke's employee." Otherwise, the program has been going well, she said. "The candidates are really dedicated to their learning, and take on-the-job training very seriously. They come prepared to clinic, and meet the expectations of the program." They've also gotten great feedback from the clinics, she added.

Saint Alphonsus Health System uses the apprenticeship program to train nurses for its Intensive Care Unit, said Claire Jones, director of critical care in Boise. "We were perpetually trying to train and onboard new, competent, and seasoned ICU nurses," she said. "Our vacancy rate couldn't keep up." The organization developed its own six-month training program and then learned about the apprenticeship program at IDOL, which they used starting with cohort 3, which graduated five months ago.

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Saint Alphonsus has eight residents in cohort 4, six of whom are in Boise and two of whom are on the Nampa campus, said Cindy Malinowski, nurse educator specialist for critical care. The next cohort, beginning in August, will have 12, she said.

The program has worked out well, Malinowski said. “The week after cohort 3 graduated, we had one of our graduates taking care of the sickest patient you could possibly muster in this unit,” she said. “She was only a week out of residency, and you would never have known, in terms of her level of performance, ability to manage an acute setting, and do it with confidence and skill.”

Moreover, all the apprentices who completed the program are still working for one of Saint Alphonsus’ three Boise units or on its Nampa campus, Malinowski said. The apprenticeships typically start as a graduate nurse or a registered nurse II, earning \$27 to \$30 an hour, Jones said. A critical care competency ladder lets graduates earn raises by pursuing specialties and documenting their competency, she said.

For the August cohort, Saint Alphonsus opened the program to external hires, and had 121 applicants, which they weeded down to 87, and then interviewed 22, Jones said. Final hires came from North Idaho, Oregon, Wyoming, the Dakotas, and the Midwest, she said.

“We had used this as an internal market development retention tool, but it was robbing Peter to pay Paul by taking acute care nurses and making them ICU nurses,” she said.

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