

Journey from CNA to RN



Tessa Epley

"I was fine with being a CNA," said Tessa Epley, 26, who works at Western Home Communities based in Cedar Falls, recalling that she didn't really want to go back to school to advance her career. But that changed when she saw a flyer at work about Western Home's licensed practical nurse (LPN) Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP), which started in 2023. "I just thought about it for a couple days and kept seeing the flyer at work and thought, 'Why not?' I didn't think I'd be picked and then they picked me first," Epley said.

The long-term care organization's LPN apprenticeship program combines paid work with classes and clinicals through Hawkeye Community College. Candidates must be certified nurse assistants first to be considered. Western Home employees mentor apprentices, who also do additional labs at work to practice skills like drawing blood. And apprentices, who become a tight-knit group as they progress through the year or so it takes to complete, support each other. Tuition, fees, books, and most attire and equipment are covered for apprentices, many of whom have young children, and might not otherwise have the time or be able to afford the cost of earning another credential.

Epley started the LPN apprenticeship in January 2025, one of the first group of eight at Western Home. She completed in December 2025 – after having a baby during the program – and then decided to become a registered nurse on her own because her skills and confidence grew out of her apprenticeship experience. She kept going "mostly because my friends convinced me, but I also convinced myself that, if I don't keep going, I am never going to go back." Western Home does not yet offer an RN registered apprenticeship pathway but that is a likely next step, said Wendy Ager, Western Home's Chief Clinical Officer. Epley is scheduled to complete her RN program in December 2026.

