

Not Just a Workforce Strategy



Kat Niemann

In rural Iowa, healthcare apprenticeship is both a workforce development strategy and a community development strategy, said Kat Niemann, Director of Human Resources at Cass Health in Atlantic. Prioritizing local talent development to staff its hospital and clinics across southwest Iowa is essential, especially when recruiting in a sparsely populated region where it can be a long drive to traditional education programs, she said. That's why Cass Health launched Iowa's first registered nurse (RN) Registered Apprenticeship Program in 2024. Apprentices train to become licensed practical nurses (LPNs)

during the first year and RNs during the second year. Instead of facing a shortage, "Now, we are at the point that we have more nurses than we can take on," said Niemann.

That return on investment is one reason Cass Health plans to continue its competency-based registered apprenticeship model, even without state grants. Apprentices, who must first be certified nurse assistants (CNAs), take classes through Iowa Western Community College. Clinical experiences are taught at Cass Health by Cass Health employees who are adjunct instructors authorized by Iowa Western. During clinicals, as apprentices demonstrate required competencies – such as administering intravenous medications – they provide that level of care to patients under supervision by licensed nurses. Other Cass Health staff serve as mentors. Apprentices are paid as CNAs and tuition, books and fees are covered. Apprentices – who are a mix of recent high school graduates and more established adults from inside and outside Cass Health – also develop close bonds in study groups and other activities, another source of support.

The other compelling reason for continuing the apprenticeship program is less tangible but just as valuable, Niemann said. "People here want the opportunity, but may need a little more support," she said. "It's worth it for our communities to remove barriers." And although Cass Health can't hire everyone who completes the program, that means other healthcare organizations in the region may be able to hire more nurses. "The ripple effect is huge," said Niemann.

See the Cass Health Registered Apprenticeship program in Action:



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