

## **Promising Practice: Program Flexibility in Volatile Job Markets Buffalo and Erie County Workforce Development Consortium**

Demand-driven workforce development programs need to have the flexibility to adapt training and respond quickly to changes in employer needs and requirements. Local healthcare job markets can be volatile. To treat employers like customers, programs need to respond rapidly when changes in local economic conditions impact training needs. Programs and course offerings should be informed by ongoing analysis of occupational projections, the supply of graduates entering the workforce, the availability of clinical work sites, and the skill sets required by businesses. The Buffalo and Erie County Workforce Development Consortium (WDC) uses employer input and labor market information (LMI) to adapt its HPOG program to changing conditions so that employers' needs are served and program participants can find jobs.

The WDC had relationships in place with major local healthcare employers at the outset of the HPOG program. These employers were surveyed on their workforce needs over the coming years. The survey results, along with LMI and input from program partners, were used to determine the six occupations initially targeted by the HPOG program:

Direct Support Professional	Medical Office Assistant
Medical Billing Clerk	Licensed Practical Nurse
Pharmacy Technician	Health Information Technician

As the program began, strategies were implemented to continue engaging with local employers. Project staff included a job developer who would focus on developing and maintaining employer relations by communicating directly with local employers about their needs and placing individuals in jobs. The program engaged new employer partners through letter announcements describing programs, internships to form relationships, breakfast clubs, and phone calls. The Project Advisory Committee was established to convene employer representatives, program staff, and program partners on a quarterly basis.

As a result of these efforts, relationships with employers were advanced in the opening year, and many successful job placements were made. However, several new challenges were emerging. The local economy was changing in ways that affected the healthcare job market, making placements for some occupations very difficult, and the program was having difficulty developing a strong relationship with some of its employer partners.

In the second program year, new strategies were developed to improve job placement rates, strengthen relationships with employers, and improve the overall effectiveness of the program. To clarify the current job market, local labor market information was reexamined and presented to employers. Based on an understanding of the new environment, enrollment targets for some occupations were reduced while new targeted occupations were added. The program added CNA/Home Health Aide training to better serve individuals on the first step of the healthcare career ladder. For the second program year, health-related Individual Training

Accounts (ITA) were added to the training menu to give participants more flexibility in choice of training programs. Participants used ITAs for Registered Nurse (RN) and surgical technology training among others. Overall, the program is now putting more focus on RN, which has the highest projected annual openings for healthcare occupations in New York's Western Region. In addition, the program continued to reach out to new employer partners, especially targeting new and small to medium-sized establishments.

Program staff knew that even when the right occupations are targeted for training, it takes well-rounded training programs for individuals to be properly prepared to enter the healthcare profession. The program convened roundtable sessions with employers that addressed not only what jobs are in demand, but also what expectations employers have for the workers in those positions and what competencies and credentials are required. Educators and other partners were brought into discussions about how the HPOG program can provide value to the employer partners. As a result of employer feedback and insights from these sessions, the program is now giving more attention to soft skills training and workplace readiness.

As the Buffalo HPOG program looks to the future, it continues to emphasize the comprehensive role of the job developer as critical to placement success. Lessons applied include using LMI with the most specific geographic area possible and engaging with all types and sizes of healthcare employers. Programs need to work to ensure employers understand the support services provided to participants, such as transportation and childcare, as well as the many additional benefits of working with the program. The program continues exploring new ways to work with employers to ensure participants can find jobs. Upcoming plans include a seminar for new employer partners and an update of marketing materials that directly target employers.