

EMPOWERED BY APPRENTICESHIP

Registered Apprenticeship helps employers fulfill Meaningful Use while helping job seekers access new career opportunities

The three counties served by Southwestern Oregon Workforce Investment Board (SOWIB) have some of the highest unemployment rates in the state. In 2017, 5.7% of workers in the tri-county area were jobless, despite high demand for healthcare workers in the region.¹

Unfortunately, because of limited education options, hospitals and clinics had no choice but to hire uncredentialed allied health personnel and invest heavily in on-the-job training.

So when the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) released Meaningful Use, now MACRA (Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act) quality incentives, it required that medical assistants (MAs) needed to be nationally credentialed in order to work within an electronic health records (EHR) system and receive appropriate reimbursements.

What was already a problem escalated to a major issue. For healthcare employers to avoid facing CMS penalties, medical assistants (MA) throughout the

region needed to get certified as quickly as possible. Looking forward, a long-term solution was needed that would help employers address the high demand for certified MAs.

SOWIB, a business-led 501(c)(3) partnership, partnered with area employers to develop a two-phased approach to solve the dilemma.

Phase 1: Certify Existing MAs

NHA understands the value of on-the-job experience. For that reason, individuals who have worked in the field for at least one year qualify to sit for the certification exam without needing to complete an external training program. “NHA was perfect for us,” says Jake McClelland, executive director of SOWIB. “We had a number of people who could immediately sit for the test if they had the desire to do it.”

“ I have taken many online classes before, but none at this caliber. It really allows us as students to learn the information and be able to apply it to our careers as Medical Assistants. ”

Caitlin L., M.A. using NHA study materials

SOWIB was able to launch a prep course to help active MAs succeed on their Medical Assistant Certification exam (CCMA). A state grant paid for the prep course instructor, as well as certification exams and NHA study materials for 75 identified candidates. The NHA study materials include interactive online tools that give MAs the accessibility to review content on their own time. With MAs in three different counties coming from 10 different healthcare organizations, this delivery model was key.

The success of the first group of candidates helped gain additional funding from the clinics, to double the total investment. This initiative has empowered 196 candidates to pursue their CCMA certification with a 95% pass rate — 22% above average for NHA testers during the same time frame.

Upon completion of phase one, a second phase was implemented in order to prevent the shortage of MAs from reoccurring.

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Phase 2: Train & Certify New CCMAs

“We knew we needed to grow our own [CCMAs] and build a training program around folks who are already living here and could fill some of these jobs,” says McClelland.

A Registered Apprenticeship program seemed to be the ideal solution. The program, supported by the United States Department of Labor, connects potential employees looking to learn new skills and attain high-paying jobs with employers in need of qualified, highly-trained workers. It’s a flexible system that combines technical instruction with on-the-job training in order to keep pace with advancing technologies.

“There’s a big push across the country to expand apprenticeship beyond the typical construction and manufacturing industry. One of those industries is healthcare.”

Jake McClelland,
Executive Director of SOWIB

With additional funding secured from the local Coordinated Care Organization (CCO), SOWIB sat down with its partners, including NHA, to start building out the state’s first ever healthcare-based Registered Apprenticeship program.

“With NHA’s help we started reaching out to programs across the country who are either doing apprenticeships or have already done it to find out what works,” McClelland says. “It’s been a great experience.”



During the development process they discovered some key areas that needed attention:

- Restructuring of current onboarding process in order to better identify apprenticeship candidates.
- Maintenance of high-level, on-the-job training and technical instruction that followed a standardize curriculum.
- Register SOWIB as an NHA proctor site so candidates have access to a centralized testing location.

Implementation toward Better Outcomes

The registered apprenticeship program is benefiting both the employer sponsors and the apprentices.

In the SOWIB apprenticeship program — which started with five employee sponsors to start — participants are paid by the employers for their 2,000 hours of hands-on training. They must also complete 156 hours of mostly online studies. Once each month, all the apprentices come together for an in-person session in which skills acquired from the field are reinforced.

“The medical assistant apprentices have been incredibly engaged in the didactic (classroom instruction) program. It is obvious that critical thinking is being developed as they compare the learning materials to their on-the-job experiences.”

Angie Webster,
In-person training instructor

Apprentices are empowered to reach their career goals. They no longer have to drop out of the workforce for two years — something that’s simply not an option for many — to gain access to training and certification and enter a fulfilling career in healthcare.

“The apprenticeship program has given me so much more confidence in my current career,” says Caitlin. “Not only do I have the skills, but now I also have the education to be able to assist patients and my employer the best way possible. It’s incredibly empowering to have this opportunity. I look forward to seeing how it continues to change my career and life for the better.”

While still underway, the program has been so well received that SOWIB is already looking to expand the apprenticeship program and add additional occupations.

NHA offers eight nationally recognized, NCCA-accredited allied health certifications that can fit into a registered apprenticeship model and help empower employers and future healthcare workers, all with the goal of improving patient care.

