

Vermont Nurse Apprenticeship and Pipeline Incentive Grant Program Annual Report

8/1/2023 – 7/31/2024

Overview

The Agency of Human Services was appropriated \$9.0 million in Act 183 of 2022 and Act 3 of 2023 to provide grants to Vermont health care employers under the Nursing Apprenticeship and Pipeline Grants Program. These grants must be used to establish or expand partnerships with Vermont nursing schools to create nursing pipeline programs, apprenticeship programs, or both that will train members of the health care employers' existing staff to become higher-level nursing professionals.

The desired outcomes of the Grants Program are to:

1. Address the state's longstanding shortage of nursing professionals, a problem that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health crisis;
2. Expand the nursing apprenticeship and pipeline program opportunities available to employees at Vermont health care provider organizations, and;
3. Promote the professional advancement of health care sector employees from marginalized communities.

The Agency of Human Services collected annual reporting in the Summer of 2024. The Report is designed to collect information about grantee progress and to provide insight into future planning. This is a summary of the 4 Grantee organizations responses to the report.

Summary: The pipeline and apprenticeship program is offering a structured pathway for employees to advance in their careers by meeting specific education, certification, and performance requirements. These programs help workers gain the skills needed to further their career. By providing a clear progression path, pipelines and apprenticeships seem to enhance staff recruitment, development, and retention while improving wages, and job satisfaction ultimately increasing the supply of clinical staff and optimizing patient care.

Participation:

Grantees reported on staff participation, nursing certificate or degree program completion and the payments made on behalf of staff during the August 1, 2023 – July 31, 2024, reporting period.

- A total of 8 eligible employees completed a nursing certificate or degree program during the reporting period.
 - 2 completed prerequisites for LPN
 - 5 completed LPN training
 - 1 became an LNA

- Of the 8 employees who completed a nursing certificate or degree program 6 transitioned to a new role following the completion of their program.
 - 3 licensed nursing assistants and 1 sterile processing technician transitioned to an LPN role and are now employed as LPNs.
 - 1 Medical Assistant transitioned to a Licensed Nursing Assistant role.
- A total \$571,429.00 worth of payments were made for tuition, fees, and the required books and supplies on behalf of Staff Participants during the reporting period.
- A total \$61,186.00 in scholarships and grants were attained by Staff Participants during the reporting period.
- A total of \$191,883.00 payments for living expenses were made to Staff Participants during the reporting period from the Grant and employer matching funds.

Challenges:

Grantees provided feedback on the obstacles encountered during the reporting period with regards to successfully implementing the Nursing Apprenticeship and Pipeline grant program. The challenges fell into 4 categories: recruitment and retention, scope and curriculum, release time and patient coverage and cost. Most reported that though these were challenges they have been able to work through them with success.

- **Recruitment & Retention:** Organizations reported the recruitment and hiring of staff to manage the program was challenging and stalled the implementation. Grantees also identified that staff turnover in the two most important positions for the pathway program presented challenges in recruiting participants.
- **Scope & Curriculum:** One of the biggest obstacles encountered by grantees was the immense amount of time it took to implement the program and to support staff participants. Time was also a factor for the students. They reported that managing the time needed to maintain a healthy schedule of work, school and life responsibilities was difficult specifically for those with limited release time built into the program. It was observed that a number of students struggled to adapt to an advanced degree program. Some individuals had not been in an educational environment for many years while others did not have experience learning in an asynchronous online environment.
- **Release Time & Patient Coverage:** For those students that received release time it was challenging to train them how to use release time hours effectively and plan accordingly for taking time off. When they did not plan ahead, it hurt the clinics ability to adequately staff the floor and the student's ability to study and ultimately succeed in school.
- **Cost:** Some students experienced unforeseen and unbudgeted out-of-pocket expenses such as parking fees, software program access fees (not covered by the bookstore allowances), and background check fees.

Successes:

Grantees provided feedback on the successes encountered during the reporting period with regards to implementing the Nursing Apprenticeship and Pipeline grant program. The successes fell into 2 categories: recruitment and retention and partnerships.

- **Recruitment & Retention:** The program was instrumental in strengthening existing pathway programs, recruiting and retaining valued employees. The ability to provide career pathways with tuition and release time pay to staff has been uplifting to both the participants and the organization. These programs support staff in their endeavors to grow and learn while they work which in turn has boosted staff morale and has helped grantees retain valued staff. Some grantees report that having this program has resulted in the increased recruitment of new employees interested in earn-while-you-learn programs. It was found that many participants had aspired to professionally develop and advance their careers but lacked the resources and support to do so. The overwhelming response received from selected participants was excitement, gratitude, and joy. It was reported that a few of the participants even teared up. The ability for staff to advance educationally is helping participant's further their careers, develop skills and prosper while helping organizations staff appropriately for optimal patient care.
- **Partnerships:** Grantees reported having made strong external partnerships with CCV, VSAC, Norwich, VTSU and the Vermont Talent Pipeline Management team at the Vermont Business Roundtable. While the external partnerships were key in grantees success so were the internal partnerships developed to provide wrap around support for participants. The partnerships serve in both directions as some grantees established dual-service agreements with college partners to help staff their clinical instructor roles via the MSN Nurse Education Pathway. Several MSN Pathway participants, who had prior experience in clinical instruction, have already started completing their agreements in supporting educational partners. Both the internal and external partnerships forged have been instrumental in the success of the program to date.

Sustainability:

Organizations reported on their progress made in regard to planning for the sustainability of the Nursing Apprenticeship or Pipeline Program post-Grant.

- One organization is adapting their program to work with the Vermont Business Roundtables nursing pathway program for sustainability and are partnering with a company that helps businesses create apprenticeships.
- Another organizations' sustainability plan relies on their goal of reducing the need for travelers and using the saved costs associated with traveler salary for the sustainable re-allocation of funds to continue their programs.

- One organization is evaluating the return on investment of this program in order to determine how to measure sustainability.
- Another organization is partnering with VSAC to fund the Workforce Opportunity Loan Program which they believe will create a more sustainable program over the next few years.

Supporting Marginalized Communities:

One of the grant goals was to leverage the Nursing Apprenticeship or Pipeline Program to help advance the professional development of marginalized employees. Below are the ways in which organizations leveraged the grant for such purposes.

- All organizations reported that this type of program provides the flexibility needed to effectively remove the common barriers non-traditional learners often face when trying to balance life, work, and continuing education. Building programs to remove socio-economic barriers to education inherently supports the professional development of marginalized communities and allows equal opportunities for employees to advance their careers. The Nursing Pipeline Program has opened the opportunity for employees to maintain fulltime employment and pursue nursing school while maintaining their accustomed paycheck and benefits. Specifically, this program allowed organizations to provide a previously unmatched level of support that allowed single mothers, those with learning disabilities and staff without advanced education past high school the opportunity to advance their careers without taking a big hit to their household finances. Similarly, a disproportionate number of men (compared to existing RN population) are participating in the program, indicating that perhaps financial support is a key piece to increasing the number of men pursuing nursing careers.
- Organizations reported that they are actively engaged in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) work at an organizational level and support employee participation in community allyship groups.