West Central Healthcare success story

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Swimming upstream

Healthcare spawns new employment opportunities

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GRAND RAPIDS — Hundreds of the region's healthcare organizations often scramble to fill slots to meet the growing demand for medical services.

Wasteful training, students not receiving career direction, a burgeoning number of retiring Baby Boomers and an aging caregiver population are just a few pieces of a complicated healthcare puzzle, according to Alliance for Health President Lody Zwarensteyn.

"West Michigan wants healthcare to be the economic driver of the future. How do we do that without workers? How are we going to train them?" Zwarensteyn told *MiBiz*.

An approximately $1 million federal grant over three years from WIRED (Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development) should help health care leaders come up with a system to alleviate worker shortages, provide adequate educational programs to funnel the right workers into the right slots. The WIRED funds go to the West Central Michigan Health Care Regional Skills Alliance (RSA) coordinated by the Alliance for Health's Craig Nobbelin.

Zwarensteyn said the region needs to change the way people are moved through the process of getting into careers.

After initial training people may discover they don't like blood or they're not a people person and they may be better suited for other areas of healthcare. Wrong career decisions waste money and the time spent on instruction. Individuals need to know upfront if they are well suited for an occupation and have the skills to go into that field.

Healthcare employment needs are much broader than the obvious shortage of nurses. Zwarensteyn and Nobbelin stressed there are many opportunities in healthcare from the direct care given by doctors and nurses to the backrooms of quality control, research, technicians and even truck drivers and plumbers.

"It's like a little city in a hospital," Nobbelin said. Workforce development needs to be examined in a broader sense. There is a set of employers with workforce needs and the "suppliers of the skills" that includes intermediate school districts, community colleges and four- year institutions. Determining the level of need of different health care occupations in important, according to Nobbelin.

The RSA holds regular Health Care Employer's Council meetings. "Their (RSA) first task was to bring the employers together to understand the program," said WIRED West Michigan Project Manager Phil Rios. "The other big issue is the coordination between the colleges and universities to streamline the process. How can they work together to get students educated with a degree and then hired."

The RSA also explores what the health care needs are in specific area. There may be a real need for workers in a specific job category in a rural area but not as much need in an urban area. Once needs are determined resources from Michigan Works and schools need to be funneled into those areas.

RSA and WIRED

The RSA was formed in 2004 and is made up of five Michigan Works agencies in a 12-county area. "The RSA was a vehicle already in existence. WIRED funding will further expedite and develop their work plan," Rios said. The RSA is the only one of the WIRED initiatives specific to the health fields.

WIRED grant funding is "really paying for brainpower to be innovative," Nobbelin told *MiBiz*. The RSA has hired consultants including a trainer with an allied health consortium who has also worked at a college and another company that designs Web sites that is trying to identify what the RSA aims to accomplish that can be translated into a Web design. That company will also assess the need for a career Web site that list all occupations and opportunities in the health care arena. The RSA is also working with Bill Guest, an expert in WorkKeys, a job skills assessment system measuring real-world skills. Nobbelin said a systems analyst is also examining lean manufacturing principles for the health care education process.

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