

Rural Roots: Investing in a Future-Ready CNA Workforce Model

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Purpose

- This program aimed to:
- (1) Implement a hospital-based Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program to support internal team member advancement
 - (2) Establish a regional testing site to streamline certification for both internal and external students

Introduction

Rural healthcare systems face persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining certified nursing assistants (CNAs), driven by limited access to training, testing delays, and minimal exposure to hospital-based clinical environments.

To address these barriers, our health system developed a hospital-based CNA program and established a regional certification site designed to expand access, accelerate workforce entry, and support career mobility.

This “grow-your-own” approach strengthens the rural workforce pipeline while preparing CNAs for success in acute care settings.

Background

CNA turnover rate near or above for the national average for past three fiscal years.

Recruiting in rural areas presents unique challenges.

Additionally, a two-fold gap was identified:

- CNA students often lack exposure to hospital-based clinicals and systems
- Students face barriers in accessing certification testing, including long delays and significant travel distances

Methods

A multidisciplinary team was formed that included:

- Nursing
- Education
- Marketing
- Legal
- Human Resources

The team established:

- Criteria for admission
- Legal contract
- Curriculum/schedule planning
- Budget, ROI and cost-center
- Space/equipment planning
- Hiring processes
- Program Director establishment

A needs assessment survey was distributed to current employees across three hospitals in the system:

- 37 respondents representing various departments, including patient access, environmental services, and food services
- Respondents indicated having >90% interest in a CNA program

Outcomes

Maximum cohort participation limited to 10

- 62% interested individuals submitted applications
- 77% of those who applied were accepted to the program

Nursing Assistant Cohort Application and Admission Summary

	Interested	Applied	Accepted	Completion
Cohort 1	24	12	10	8
Cohort 2	18	14	10	Pending

Attrition in the first cohort was due to:

- 1 health reason; returning to second cohort
- Management scheduling conflict

Since opening on September 29, 2025, the certification site has successfully completed 98 certification appointments

Impact

The curriculum was enriched with hospital specific competencies, such as EHR training, acute care exposure and quality metric compliance

Credentialing center is open for NA graduates within the hospital system, regionally, and statewide

Early findings indicate strong enthusiasm with and participation among current hospital staff and strengthening the rural health pipeline

Program is accessible to all team members across the health system

Strong program outcomes have driven continued expansion:

- NA I training with board of nursing approved expanded skills
- Addition of a NA II program



Lessons Learned

- Early partnership development with DHHS and local community colleges improved collaboration and program alignment.
- Sustainable partnerships with credentialing agencies reduced certification barriers and supported program success.
- Early identification of students’ advancement goals enabled targeted guidance and clearer career pathways.

Conclusion

This hospital-based CNA program and certification site demonstrate a sustainable, community-focused approach to strengthening the rural healthcare workforce.

By improving access to training, aligning education with acute-care readiness, and creating clear career pathways, the model supports retention, accelerates workforce entry, and reinforces long-term workforce stability.

Early engagement and strong employee interest highlight the program’s potential for broader implementation, offering a scalable framework that other rural and underserved regions can replicate to build a resilient CNA pipeline.

References



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