

Healthcare Workforce Development
in San Diego County:
Recommendations for Changing Times

Brad Wiscons

President
North County Healthcare Consulting

Agnes Zsigovics

Workforce & Business Analyst
San Diego Workforce Partnership

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One of the fastest growing areas for careers in San Diego County is the healthcare field. This diverse sector is changing rapidly and has thousands of worksites in San Diego County. The San Diego Workforce Partnership (SDWP) has dedicated resources to developing a regional strategy to address growth in healthcare. There is a particular need for workers in allied healthcare¹ who come from racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Using funds from a California Workforce Association grant, SDWP worked with employers to identify their needs and is promoting key strategies to diversify and effectively train workers for the healthcare sector in our region. This briefing paper highlights findings and recommendations.



What do employers need?

Many recent graduates of healthcare training come out expecting jobs waiting for them. Unfortunately, because of the economic downturn, these trained workers encounter a difficult job market.

Employers told SDWP that while they need more trained workers, these workers must come with

experience. Employers have told us that there is an “experience gap” for those students who have recently graduated. While new graduates often possess the needed academic knowledge to be hired, they lack necessary “real world” experience. The challenge becomes: how do nurses and allied healthcare workers get the experience they need to obtain employment?

¹ Allied health professionals are health care practitioners with formal education and clinical training who are credentialed through certification, registration and/or licensure. They collaborate with physicians and other members of the health care team to deliver high quality patient care services for the identification, prevention, and treatment of diseases, disabilities and disorders. (http://www.healthpronet.org/docs/allied_health_fact_sheet.pdf)

Job Growth in Health Care - 2010 to 2015			
Description	2010 Jobs	2015 Jobs	% Growth
Physical therapists	1,632	1,914	17.3
Medical assistants	7,049	8,212	16.5
Occupational therapists	971	1,115	14.8
Registered nurses	21,960	24,623	12.1
Medical records and health information technicians	1,508	1,691	12.1
Radiologic technologists and technicians	1,449	1,603	10.6
Pharmacists	2,219	2,451	10.5
Medical and clinical laboratory technologists	806	885	9.8
Total	37,594	42,494	

Source: EMSI Complete Employment - 2nd Quarter 2010

Employers have specific jobs to fill. The projections above show occupations that will be in the highest demand in the next 3 to 5 years: physical therapists, medical assistants, occupational therapists, registered nurses, medical records and health information technicians, radiologic technologists and technicians, pharmacists, and medical and clinical laboratory technologists.

When we asked where particular skills were needed, employers pointed to the need for culturally competent workers with skills in foreign languages. A recent study on allied healthcare found that one in four employers use or need certified healthcare interpreters or medical translators at their worksites.² As part of this cultural component, employers tell us that the number one job skill in demand is the ability to speak Spanish as a second language. Cultural awareness and sensitivity are also needed.

Employers look for other key skills. Mainly, they are looking to hire people with good verbal and writing skills. They also look for potential employees who possess knowledge of health information technology, stress management, mathematics, customer service skills and quality management practices. Many employers also cited a lack of basic skills in English and math among employees as particularly difficult to manage.

² Research on allied healthcare employment by SDWP, BW Research Partnership and Green LMI Consulting, August 2010

What can we do to respond to the needs of employers?

There are various strategies that can be implemented to help

fulfill employer needs. **The creation a regional independent healthcare workforce development organization is the first step.** Healthcare employers, educators, statewide policy makers, regulators, and workforce development providers can collaborate to establish an organization that can conduct planning, implementation and evaluation. The organization can develop policy innovations needed to improve the system.

It can also coordinate regional funding efforts, establish standards of practice, and serve as the liaison between San Diego County and statewide and national system change experts.



Measuring the effectiveness of the workforce development system is vital for program development, management, sustainability and cost effectiveness. Key indicators such as financial impact, quality of care, patient safety and customer satisfaction need to form part of a comprehensive evaluation system that measures outcomes. **Consistent and transparent evaluation of outcomes can lead to the development of best practices.**

While it is important to support existing healthcare workforce pipelines, **it is also vital to develop new programs that address employer needs.** For example, programs that provide volunteer experiences to high school and post-secondary students could help close the “experience gap”. On-the-job training could provide “real world” experience for workers. Programs that target underrepresented groups and disadvantaged students could help increase the number of culturally competent healthcare workers. Two recommendations are to:

- Develop a summer youth program that allows low-income youth the opportunity to explore careers in healthcare.
- Support or create programs that provide a transition for Navy Corpsman who are returning to civilian life.



Support services are important to help ensure the success of students, especially those from underrepresented groups. Any healthcare workforce education programs should secure the resources **to help provide transportation assistance, assistance with childcare, language courses, social services, uniforms, supplies and equipment to students from underrepresented groups.** To promote a diverse, culturally competent workforce, educational providers should offer resources to students from underrepresented groups. Specific funding priority should go to those educational providers who offer such resources, and work towards improving coordination between support services providers and healthcare students.

Healthcare training programs must provide adequate and appropriate clinical experience for their students. If we can ensure that students have adequate clinical experiences as part of their education, graduates will be more prepared to join the workforce. Presently there are no mandates surrounding clinical internships. A newly-created healthcare workforce development organization needs to partner with educational providers to formulate and implement standards surrounding clinical experiences.

Traditional workforce development has relied heavily on governmental and private grants to provide training and support. Today, creative and non-traditional funding strategies are necessary. **Employers and organized labor can be key partners in finding ways to develop our future workforce.** They can create healthcare apprenticeship programs similar to those found in the building trades and provide internship opportunities to students. To expand funding, workforce development leaders can form partnerships with insurance providers, foundations and agencies invested in healthcare reform, quality of care and patient safety.

What's next?

The San Diego Workforce Partnership (SDWP) and its Workforce Investment Board will continue to maintain a leadership position to identify and implement strategies that will help develop our healthcare workforce. The organization will seek out statewide collaborations and funding opportunities in an effort to develop a diverse healthcare workforce that has the necessary skills and experience to respond to employers' needs. As a starting point, it is recommended that a coordinating council be developed to implement



strategies. **The council should represent a diversity of healthcare providers, and take a mega-regional approach that incorporates the areas of San Diego, Imperial, Riverside, Orange Counties and the international border.**

SDWP will also continue to collect labor market information and identify sector needs and trends. **Timely and consistent data** can be used in planning, strategic decision-making, program improvement, and the documentation of results and outcomes. SDWP will take full advantage of any legislation that makes funds available for healthcare-related projects. SDWP will also make governmental policy change recommendations that have the potential to develop the healthcare workforce.

The healthcare sector continues to change rapidly. The San Diego Workforce Partnership will work rapidly to keep pace and foster the development of a skilled, diverse workforce in the healthcare sector.

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Research completed by Brad Wiscons, President, North County Healthcare Consulting

Edited by Chuck Flacks, Research Director, San Diego Workforce Partnership

Photos by Shannon Michelsen and Joseph Wanek

For more information regarding healthcare workforce development please contact Chuck Flacks, Research Director, San Diego Workforce Partnership at chuck.flacks@workforce.org or (619) 228-2935.