



PROMISING PRACTICES

State Strategies for Advancing Apprenticeship

Expanding Apprenticeship to Meet Talent Needs of Business

WEST MICHIGAN WORKS!

West Michigan Medical Assistant Registered Apprenticeship Program

West Michigan healthcare providers are struggling with a shortage of Medical Assistants—a problem projected to grow in the coming decade. The regional Workforce Board, West Michigan Works!, built on its sector work with local healthcare employers to collaborate on a one-year Medical Assistant Registered Apprenticeship Program (MARAP), with the Workforce Board as the apprenticeship sponsor.

For years, West Michigan Works! used a sector strategy to align and prioritize their workforce investments. In working with area healthcare employers, the Workforce Board's healthcare industry sector staff were hearing the same story: With the critical shortage of Medical Assistants (MAs), employers were poaching one another's employees. The problem promised to worsen with a projected 746 annual job openings for Medical Assistants in 2022 and just 151 graduates each year from area colleges.

West Michigan Works! posed the question to the region's healthcare providers: Do you want to collaborate to grow the labor market, or continue to poach each other's workers within the tight labor pool? Three large employers agreed to take a risk and work with their competition to create a Medical Assistant Registered Apprenticeship Program. Likewise, three community colleges came together to develop a shared curriculum addressing the skill set common to all three employers.

Participants in the MARAP work 24 hours as MA apprentices and take 16 hours of classes (unpaid) each week. Every quarter, they participate in an "externship" period to gain practical work experiences, develop skills, and test their competencies. Once deemed competent by a preceptor, apprentices can use those skills on the job in the next quarter with certified mentor supervision. After one year, the apprentice graduates with an apprenticeship certificate from the U.S. Department of Labor, takes the exam for either Registered or Certified Medical Assistant licensing, and begins full-time employment as a Medical Assistant.

The Workforce Board plays several essential roles. First, as the intermediary between multiple employers, community colleges, workforce, and community-based organizations, the Workforce Board helps negotiate the common curriculum, on-the-job training, competencies, recruitment, student financial aid, and supportive services. As a result, West Michigan Works! developed one apprenticeship program that serves multiple employers in the area.

Second, West Michigan Works! serves as the sponsor of the apprenticeship program; they coordinate administrative aspects of registering and running the apprenticeship. As sponsor—one of the few workforce boards in the country to do so—they remove administrative burdens from employers.

Finally, one of the Workforce Board's most critical roles is braiding funding to offset costs for apprentices and employers. Utilizing employer tuition contributions, Pell Grants, the State's Skilled Trade Training Fund (that pays up to \$3,000/apprentice), Individual Training Accounts, On-the-Job Training subsidies through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, and other grants and local resources, West Michigan Works! secured funding for 72% of the training costs for the first cohort of Medical Assistant apprentices and 100% for the second cohort.

The feedback we've gotten from employers and community colleges is that the apprenticeship students are more confident and experienced than their counterparts going through the regular open-enrollment process. Everybody loves it. Apprentices are ready to hit the ground running after the first year. They attribute that to the progressive building of their skills all along.

**- Kristie Scarffe, Industry Sector Lead,
West Michigan Works!**

Other partners play critical roles as well. Michigan Works! Service Center staff recruit and screen candidates and assist with remediation, basic skills preparation, and supportive services. Nonprofit community partners working with under-represented populations also help with recruitment and job readiness, ensuring a diverse pipeline into the apprenticeship program.

ADVICE FOR OTHER STATES

- **Apprenticeship must be Employer-Driven.** Deb Lyzenga, Regional Director of Business Solutions, says, “The first step is to educate your employers about apprenticeship, then wait. When they are ready, they will come to you. Don’t push it on them.” She describes the “three-legged stool” that is essential to success: a collaborative relationship among workforce, employers, and training providers. Start with employer needs, such as the present and growing shortage of Medical Assistants.
- **Begin with a Few Innovators, then Build on Success.** Three West Michigan employers were willing to collaborate with their competitors on an apprenticeship model to grow a shared labor pool for the long-term. Today, two new employers have joined MARAP after witnessing its success, and new apprenticeship occupations are in the works. “The employers are finding that this model works and that the people that come out of the apprenticeship are better than what they see traditionally,” according to Ms. Lyzenga. “When that happens, they hop on and say, ‘What can we do next?’” Project staff believe that success builds buy in, which not only grows apprenticeship, but will help sustain it in the long run.
- **Listen to Employers and Make Adjustments.** West Michigan employers reported that the screening process yielded fewer viable candidates than they had hoped. West Michigan Works! adjusted to conduct earlier and more intensive outreach and increase efforts with community partners. As a result, twice as many applicants applied to be part of Cohort 3 than had applied for Cohorts 1 or 2.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR REPLICATION

- **Creative Work-Arounds May Be Needed to Conform to Licensing Rules.** Employers are prohibited from hiring someone as a Medical Assistant before they are licensed, so consortium employers created a new position, Medical Assistant Apprentice. This position is typically hired as part of a resource pool, clerical, or nutritional services.
- **Streamlining the Recruitment Process Will Make the Program More Accessible.** West Michigan’s initial recruitment process required applicants to come into the Michigan Works! Center three to four times. This was cumbersome, especially for people with income, child care, or transportation challenges. They streamlined the process by developing an online portal so candidates can do more to prepare (like brush up on math) and apply online.
- **Consider the Board as Sponsor.** Unions or employers have typically sponsored apprenticeship programs in the past, but the West Michigan Works! Board breaks that mold to act as sponsor (tracking hours, surveying apprentices, employers, and community colleges, and reporting to the U.S. Department of Labor). West Michigan Works! see themselves as the “backbone,” pulling together and supporting colleges and employers across the region. Acting as sponsor was a natural fit.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

- Employers have been so satisfied with the Medical Assistant apprenticeship program that apprenticeships are being developed in other healthcare occupations: Central Sterile Processing Technician and Surgical Technician. There is interest in Phlebotomy as well.
- Inspired by the success of MARAP, IT companies on West Michigan Works! IT sector strategy team are exploring an apprenticeship program for Network Administrator. Additionally, construction companies, which have a long history of apprenticeship, are exploring ways to work more closely with the Workforce Board to improve their programs.

To learn more, visit <http://www.westmiworks.org/marap>

Find out about Michigan’s apprenticeship work here:
http://www.michigan.gov/wda/0,5303,7-304-64362_73460---,00.html

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