North Carolina Healthcare Innovations Report

June 2012

The Institute for Emerging Issues has had two goals for healthcare innovation for the past two years: to improve healthcare access, quality and cost and to maximize the industry’s economic development potential for North Carolina. Defining new opportunities for our state to grow a skilled workforce, raising awareness about the economic impact of health, and highlighting the importance of engaging the next generation in this work have been critical to developing North Carolina’s competitive advantage in the healthcare industry. The work has centered on IEI engaging hundreds of stakeholders to attain these goals.

Innovating Job Creation and Healthcare Access

The healthcare industry provides a massive opportunity for job creation in the state. North Carolina’s unemployment rate now hovers at 9 percent, half of whom are unable to secure a job within six months. These workers are more likely to drain their savings, experience difficulty meeting basic family needs, and face significant challenges in finding work. At the same time, however, the demand for a skilled healthcare workforce continues to increase. In fact, healthcare jobs in N.C. increased by 46 percent compared to 3 percent for the economy as a whole (1999-2009). This presents a clear opportunity for innovations in the development of the healthcare workforce and job creation.

Working with Communities

Nearly 150 participants from 40 counties gathered at four Community Forums to discuss how our state could take advantage of the opportunity to grow its healthcare workforce. With allied health jobs responsible for 44 percent of the growth in healthcare jobs, the Forums made clear the need for allied health professionals, regardless of the region.

Forum participants focused on how to grow allied health career paths to meet their region’s needs. In doing so, they uncovered seven key barriers and over 80 state and local strategies to address them. These strategies were shared with key networks and decision makers, and as a result, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction and IEI will partner to communicate relevant strategies, including awareness of allied health careers, to local education agencies statewide.

Allied Health is often defined as a healthcare professional with the exceptions of physician, nurse, chiropractor, dentist, optometrist, pharmacist and podiatrist. Examples include: dental hygienist, dietitian, medical technologist, occupational therapist and physical therapist.
Barriers to growing healthcare jobs

1. Lack of knowledge about healthcare career opportunities.
2. Lack of preparation of students entering into college and the workforce.
3. Access to quality faculty, as clinical settings can offer more competitive salaries.
4. Lack of available clinical placement sites.
5. Lack of programs or the supports that incent opportunities for career advancement.
6. Lack of funding affects multiple points along the pipeline.
7. Poor health and wellness of healthcare workers to meet the demands of their work.

Coming out of the Community Forums was a conundrum – the demand for skilled allied health professionals, and a troubling supply of potential workforce represented by the high numbers of long-term unemployed. Developing the skills needed to fill allied health jobs is a challenge that is more pronounced for the long-term unemployed, many of whom are in their mid-40s and have been out of the classroom for twenty or more years. Few strategies have been implemented that focus on supporting their transition into allied health careers.

These North Carolinians may not know how to connect to existing allied health career opportunities. They might not know the process for enrolling in a training program, the time commitment, rigor, and/or associated costs. Moreover, the process of choosing a career and enrolling in a training program can be lengthy, and unemployment insurance benefits often run out before the training program can be completed. Long-term unemployed individuals have different concerns and needs than traditional students. Navigating employment resources, handling the fear of going back to school, and arranging childcare and transportation can be major barriers to making that transition.

Challenges continue even for those who enter the education pipeline. Allied health program graduates may not have the skills and attributes that are needed for the healthcare jobs available in their communities. Once hired, healthcare employers often bear the responsibility of providing such training for career advancement and could benefit from partner resources. Additionally, employers

CRISSY GARNER’S STORY

I was a single parent who often worked two or more jobs trying to support my children. I had put off going back to school to make sure I was a good provider. Most people in my county never completed high school or went to the mill immediately after they graduated, so this was the only way most people knew how to make a living. Once the local textile mill closed, a lot of people were left pondering how to make a living.

I’m a prime example of what a dislocated worker represents. Living in Halifax County, one of the poorest areas in N.C., I have struggled to find gainful employment in my rural community. This obstacle became even larger after I was hit by a drunk driver and had to go on life support. Though I ultimately overcame that challenge, I spent many days depressed and not knowing what to do next.

A friend suggested I go back to school and start a new career. The thought of going back to school after more than 20 years terrified me, but I had Student Support Services at Halifax Community College encouraging me to take a deep breath and to refocus. The program offered me tutoring, mentoring, and advisement. It was this support, along with family and friends that pushed me to strive to do my best. I will graduate in spring ‘12 with honors.

Luckily, I have a support system, but so many others lack that lifeline. People often need someone to guide them and show them the way. By implementing this program, we can reach out and help many to obtain the skills that are necessary to succeed. Because of my own experiences, I can relate to many others who struggle with similar circumstances. I continually persist in bettering myself and want to use my experiences to be an advocate for those who are going through similar situations. Most people are looking for a hand up, not a hand out. This program can be that hand.

Faculty Fellows

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Businesses as Leaders in Health:

As a pilot, IEI is working with local businesses in one N.C. community to identify roles this sector can adopt to improve community health, thereby improving economic development. Through collective impact thinking, IEI will also help to build the capacity of other sectors within the community to partner with these businesses on a common health improvement agenda.

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The demonstration model calls for a collaborative partnership at the local level to implement strategies that address the four key challenges to increase the utilization and effectiveness of an allied health pipeline. As a healthcare employer driven initiative, the local partnership will assess, link and mobilize existing programs and services; implement multilevel approaches; and utilize recommended strategies to transition the long-term unemployed in rural communities into allied health jobs. The demonstration model outlines program infrastructure, including key staff, partnership representation and healthcare employer engagement. It also calls for more supportive services for the long-term unemployed worker,
Everyone pays for the cost of poor health. As more people develop chronic conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke, health insurance premiums continue to increase. These same conditions have a negative impact if the business offers health insurance due to high premiums. Sick employees also request more sick days or come in to work, but are less productive when they do not feel well. They also adversely affect profit margins. Communities have to cover the cost of poor health, too, which compete against programs and services that might otherwise be used to fund education, economic development and other initiatives.

Raising the Bar County Health Tool

Having access to credible, unbiased information and understanding the connections between these pieces of data are critical for making smart policy decisions. As a result, IEI created Raising the Bar, a county health tool that explores the inter-linkages of health, environment, economic, and education on healthcare costs. At the 2011 Emerging Issues Forum, IEI released this interactive county-level tool to allow counties across the state to see how improvements in any one of these variables can improve health outcomes and save money. Based upon user feedback, the environment variable was changed from a feedback, the environment variable was changed from a...