



Alaska Primary Care Association Apprenticeship



Alaska Primary Care
ASSOCIATION

Introduction

Community health centers provide comprehensive primary and prevention services in medically underserved areas and communities. Collectively, they service more than 28 million people at 11,000 sites located throughout all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. territories. Alaska Primary Care Association (APCA) is a statewide consortium serving 27 community health centers working to increase access to critical safety net services for vulnerable populations throughout the state. Each year, more than 113,000 patients receive affordable and accessible medical, dental, behavioral health, substance use disorder, and vision care from health centers in Alaska

Through innovative programming, APCA supports its health centers in providing quality services that are responsive to the state's unique characteristics. Alaska is both the largest state in nation and the most sparsely populated. In fact, the vast majority of Alaska is considered "frontier" by the State Offices of Rural Health, which refers to areas where the average population density is one person per square mile. Many communities served by APCA health centers are located in remote areas that are geographically isolated from cities and towns with health care infrastructure — some health centers are not even connected by the road system.

Like many states, as the result of a growing demand for health care services, Alaska faces a shortage of trained, skilled health care professionals. Health centers located in remote regions are particularly challenged in finding and recruiting qualified enabling services staff that are needed to connect underserved populations to care and coverage and support critical health center operations. Health centers in these areas tend to recruit staff locally, creating the need for high quality, accessible education and training opportunities.

About the Health Care Registered Apprenticeship

To help address the health care workforce shortage and training barriers throughout the state, in 2017 APCA partnered with the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) to launch the Health Care Registered Apprenticeship program. Supported by U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) funding and administered by DOLWD, APCA served as DOLWD's main partner in expanding health care apprenticeships throughout the state.

After assessing the health care workforce needs in Alaska, APCA developed on-the-job apprenticeships paired with online education and training for five critical occupations:

- **Community Health Worker (CHW)**
- **Billing and Coding Specialist (BCS)**
- **Medical Administrative Assistant (MAA)**
- **Clinical Medical Assistant (CMA)**
- **Electronic Health Records (EHR) Specialist**

All apprentices participating in the APCA program are employed with health care organizations and "earn while they learn" without needing to leave their home and family. To apply and gain acceptance into the program, apprentice candidates must be sponsored by their employers. Once selected and enrolled, apprentices receive standards-based training and distance education through an online learning platform. Sponsoring employers provide supervision to ensure that apprentices are trained in the core competencies of the profession. This includes hands-on training under the supervision of a qualified mentor with documented and verified on-the-job learning. Completion of the apprenticeship ranges between about six months to two years depending on the occupation and amount of experience transferred.

APCA APPRENTICESHIP AT-A-GLANCE

Number of Apprentice Tracks: 5

Number of Graduates: 64 (Years 2017-2019)

Geography: Urban & rural, including “frontier”

Service Area: Alaska

- **Structured Distance Education** — Apprentices participate in weekly tele-lectures, as well as required online coursework.
- **On-The-Job Learning** — Apprentices partake in supervised on-the-job work that aligns and reinforces online curriculum.
- **Milestones** — Apprentices must achieve specific milestones in training and competencies.
- **Hours** — Apprentices complete an approved number of hours by the U.S. DOL that must be performed during the course of the apprenticeship.
- **Wages** — Apprentices receive periodic wage progression to a DOLWD approved “Journey worker” wage.

Components and Curriculum

To enable individuals located in remote areas to participate in the program, technical instruction is delivered and completed online. Through the remote learning model, participants receive peer support and are able to network with other apprentices. APCA even offers online mentor training and peer support for supervisors. More specifically, each career track within the apprenticeship program requires the following core components:

- **Employment with a Health Care Provider** — Apprentices must be employed in the occupation they choose to apprentice to.
- **Identification of a Mentor** — Apprentices must be supervised by a mentor who is fully trained and competent in the career track job.

Curriculum for each career track is designed to support learning in core competencies, supplement the skills learned during on-the-job training, and prepare apprentices to become nationally certified in all but the CHW occupation. Examples of CHW curriculum and training topics include “The Role of the CHW,” “Defining Public Health,” “Client Interviews and Confidentiality,” and “Conflict Management.” Supplemental trainings tailored for each career track are also provided. For example, CHWs can receive supplemental training on hypertension and diabetes.

“The model of health care apprenticeships as developed by Alaska Primary Care works very well for rural health care clinics with limited access to training opportunities, and a workforce that largely lacks certification. Apprentices can remain employed in their community and continue working while completing their apprenticeship training and certification. Employers benefit from fully trained staff without disruption in staffing. The apprentices benefit from increased wages and the exodus of leaving rural Alaska is halted by providing training within these communities.”

**Julie Frizzell, Program Coordinator
Alaska Department of Labor
and Workforce Development**

The Benefits of Building a Support Staff Pipeline

Since January 2017, APCA has trained more than 100 individuals through the program, including 42 apprentices who are currently enrolled and 64 graduates. These apprentices work in a wide variety of settings beyond health centers, including tribal organizations, dialysis clinics and even a chiropractor practice.

Upon completion of the program, apprentices are awarded journey-level status and Certification of Apprenticeship from the U.S. DOL. One additional benefit of the program is that it has helped improve pass rates for nationally recognized certification exams for the apprentices in the career tracks with national certification and credentials.

APCA has also partnered with Alaska Pacific University (APU) to offer college credits for training received through the program. Individuals currently enrolled in an apprenticeship or who have completed a registered apprenticeship have an option of pursuing APU's Health Occupations undergraduate certificate program with enrollment in the apprentice program counting towards academic coursework requirements.

Funding

U.S. DOL apprenticeship grant funds administered by DOLWD support APCA's annual budget of approximately \$250,000 for the program. Administrative costs are about

\$3,000-\$5,000 per apprenticeship, which includes hosting curriculum and tracking on-the-job-learning and milestones. Employer resources to support participation in the program is provided in-kind. Currently, neither employers nor apprentices are charged to participate in the program. However, employers participating in the program have found it to be a valuable asset, with more than half reporting that they would consider covering programs costs for the service on an ongoing basis.

Other long-term sustainability strategies for apprenticeship programs beyond DOL grants include directing state general funds to apprenticeship programs that partner with school districts or colleges, creating tax incentives for employer-sponsored programs, or developing partnerships with managed care plans.

Concluding Thoughts

Apprenticeship is an important strategy in developing a pipeline for qualified, enabling services and health care support staff, particularly in areas that are remote and underserved. By taking advantage of one-time grant funds, APCA developed and launched a successful apprentice program in less than two years that is filling a critical need throughout the state.

NACHC Mission Statement

To promote efficient, high quality, comprehensive health care that is accessible, culturally and linguistically competent, community directed, and patient centered for all.

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