



# ADVANCING THE FRONTLINE HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE

Job creation is a national priority, and health care is a high-demand and expanding segment of the economy. That combination makes this a strategic moment for creating and implementing innovative skill-development strategies that meet the needs of health care providers and workers. Low-wage workers on the front lines of health care can advance to higher-skilled, family-sustaining careers, while health care providers can prosper with a robust, well-prepared, and engaged workforce. The result will be better care and healthier communities and economies.

Frontline health care employees have critical responsibilities in delivering the nation's direct care and health services. Representing about six million women and men, they include home health aides caring for elders; medical assistants taking vital signs and collecting patient data; lab technicians ensuring that tests run properly; and substance abuse workers helping a group of recovering addicts.

Yet even as their numbers increase, few frontline employees earn enough to support a family. By and large, frontline workers lack the formal training that leads to credentials and higher-skilled jobs in health care. With few opportunities to advance in health care, both job retention and morale are low. Continuity of care and health services suffer as a result.

## JFF'S APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN HEALTH CARE

### AT THE WORKPLACE:

#### LEARNER-FRIENDLY WORKPLACES

JFF helps employers "grow their own" quality workforces. Employers reshape traditional approaches to recruiting, training, and advancing health care workers, in the process transforming human resources policies to accommodate learning at the workplace. They create clear, accessible career pathways that enable low-wage employees to advance to higher-skilled positions. Employers realize returns on their investments in professional development as the retention, productivity, and quality of frontline workers increase.

### EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:

#### WORKER-FRIENDLY EDUCATION

JFF helps educational institutions develop effective learning methods for working adults, leading to degrees and credentials that are valued by health care employers. Learning takes place at the workplace and online—rather than exclusively in the classroom—making it easier for full-time frontline employees to earn academic credit or postsecondary credentials.

### COMMUNITY:

#### COMMUNITY-WIDE COLLABORATION

JFF helps build strong partnerships among health care employers, workforce development services, and educational institutions to promote career advancement for frontline staff. Employers and colleges collaborate to develop and deliver work-based curricula. The partnerships also improve workers' access to academic and family support services, such as child care, transportation, and academic remediation. In other words, partnerships achieve results because they respond to the needs of workers and employers.

## RX FOR A NEW HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE

In March 2010, JFF convened 100 policymakers, funders, workforce practitioners, and health care industry leaders committed to building a highly qualified workforce to expand access, lower costs, and improve the quality of care and health services. *Rx for a New Health Care Workforce* focused on the success of and need for broad-based local partnerships that can support career paths for frontline health care employees. The discussions are summarized in *Bringing the Frontlines to the Forefront*, published by JFF.

Grounding the convening was *Rx for a New Health Care Workforce: Promising Practices and Their Policy Implications*. This JFF report identifies public policy measures for matching the demands of a reformed health care system with a supply of skilled professionals and support staff.

*Jobs to Careers* supports 17 partnerships of health care employers, educational institutions, and other organizations to create lasting improvements in how they train, reward, and advance frontline employees. A hallmark of *Jobs to Careers* is work-based learning, in which frontline employees master occupational and academic skills in the course of completing their job tasks and fulfilling their day-to-day responsibilities. JFF manages the initiative, which is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in collaboration with the Hitachi Foundation and with additional support from the U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration.

Through *Jobs to Careers*, **East Boston Neighborhood Health Center** partnered with **Bunker Hill Community College** to establish the **Education and Training Institute** to prepare medical and clerical assistants to become certified auxiliary interpreters. The Institute is an "on ramp" to higher education for frontline employees who often had poor experiences with school and were hesitant to step foot onto a college campus. Without leaving the health center, they register for and take college classes in preparation for higher-paid positions, and they practice newly acquired interpretative skills in a work setting.



All of the 23 regional collaboratives in the *National Fund for Workforce Solutions* target health care as one of the fastest-growing sectors in their communities or states. JFF is the implementation partner for the National Fund, an unprecedented partnership of funders that is testing new ways to address a critical problem: the large gap between the skills many workers have and the skills many employers need to compete. More than 200 foundations and 900 employers are part of the effort.

With assistance from the *National Fund for Workforce Solutions*, the **Los Angeles Health Care Workforce Development Program** uses assessment, career counseling, personal coaching, basic skills training, and tutoring to support career advancement for low-skilled workers. Designed to improve the retention of full-time, skilled workers in nursing and allied health fields, the program is a partnership with the Service Employees International Union's Local 721 and the Los Angeles Department of Health Services.

*Breaking Through* promotes and strengthens the efforts of 33 innovative community colleges to help low-literacy adults prepare for and succeed in occupational and technical degree programs, including the burgeoning health care field. With community colleges educating close to 60 percent of America's health care workforce, the initiative focuses on strategies that improve postsecondary outcomes for adult learners. Administered by JFF in collaboration with the National Council for Workforce Education, *Breaking Through* is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walmart Foundation, and the Charles Steward Mott Foundation. Funders have also included the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

When faced with an urgent need for 500 registered nurses over the next five years, **Owensboro Medical Health System** partnered with **Owensboro Community & Technical College** to design an educational and career pathway to prepare local workers to fill those jobs. Key elements of this *Breaking Through* project have included employer-paid tuition support, online and classroom instruction at the hospital, and remedial math courses tailored by working nurses to the concepts fundamental to their daily job tasks.

## Health Care Affinity Group

SPONSORED BY  
JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

JFF's *Health Care Affinity Group* is a virtual networking resource for those interested in facilitating the advancement of new and incumbent low-wage workers across the health care sector. Through conference calls and webinars, Affinity Group members share best practices, hear from subject-matter experts, and discuss new ways to think about the issues facing workers. To participate in the Health Care Affinity Group, please contact Grace Ausick at [gausick@jff.org](mailto:gausick@jff.org).

## HEALTH CARE VIRTUAL CAREER PLATFORM

With funding from the U.S. Department of Labor, the American Association of Community Colleges is developing the *Health Care Virtual Career Platform*, an online source for career information. JFF is creating easy-to-use outreach materials detailing the platform's features, as well as webinars and video-based training materials. JFF will also manage regional training sessions on implementing the *Virtual Career Platform*.



## JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 [info@jff.org](mailto:info@jff.org)

88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110

85 Prescott Street, Suite 405, Worcester, MA 01605

2000 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 5300, Washington, DC 20006

[WWW.JFF.ORG](http://WWW.JFF.ORG)

Jobs for the Future develops, implements, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In 200 communities in 41 states, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers.