



“Investing in Frontline Workers”

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Guest Editorial by Marta Frank, Jerry Rubin, and Kelley Spada

Who would doubt that a high-quality workforce is critical to our health care? In behavioral health, that means we expect that the professionals responsible for our care—psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, nurses, social workers—are well trained and have the appropriate credentials.

But what about the entry-level workers on the front lines of every type of health care setting, the people who deliver much of actual, “hands on” health care today, working in behavioral and community health clinics, drug and alcohol treatment programs, and counseling centers and hospitals? Research and anecdotal evidence are coming to agree with common sense: the quality of care delivered by frontline workers plays a critical role in preventive and early intervention services, chronic illness management, and long-term and post acute care.

Yet few entry-level workers earn enough to support a family, many have less than a Bachelor’s-level education, and almost all lack credentials that make independent practice possible. Their formal training is often limited; instead, they learn their jobs from peers and through “trial and error” experience that may be valuable—but that might also limit the quality of care they provide and their chances to advance.

The costs to employers are high as well, including not the lost potential for delivering the best care possible but also from turnover among frontline workers, which in behavioral health is often 60 percent in a year and can reach 120 percent. High turnover, as we know, disrupts continuity of care, and it is expensive to train replacement employees, even at the entry level.

If health care employers are to remain competitive, their business models must address high turnover rates and the lack of advancement opportunities among frontline workers. In other words, improving health care requires finding ways to efficiently and effectively upgrade the skills and advancement opportunities of frontline workers.

That is the goal of *Jobs to Careers*, a national initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in collaboration with the Hitachi Foundation. This four-year demonstration project seeks to change the way that health care employers train, advance, and reward frontline workers—and thereby to improve care and service delivery.

On October 1, 2006, *Jobs to Careers* announced its first grants, including awards to two projects that will address workforce needs in behavioral health by investing in frontline workers: SSTARreach in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and Bridging Jobs to Careers in Pennsylvania. Both represent broad-based partnerships that bring together health care employers, educational institutions, and public and community health organizations.

The lead partner in SSTARreach is SSTAR, a human services agency in Fall River, Massachusetts. SSTAR provides a full continuum of addiction treatment, and its sister program, SSTAR of Rhode Island, operates that state's only public detox facility and a residence for addicted mothers and their children. The national nursing shortage affects both employers, and the impact is even greater because the pay for detox nurses is not competitive with hospital-based nursing. SSTARreach is an innovative answer: its work-based learning programs, delivered in collaboration with education partners, will help frontline employees in the addiction field prepare for professional careers.

Toward this goal, a central element in SSTARreach will be to create "career paths." As entry-level workers learn new skills, gain experience, and earn credentials, they will be able to rise, step by step, to professional positions, such as counselors and detox nurses. By addressing its professional staffing needs through this "grow your own" strategy, SSTAR expects to improve staff retention, in turn reducing recruitment and orientation costs.

In Pennsylvania, Bridging Jobs to Careers is supported by a partnership that includes a union, employers, educational institutions, and a workforce development agency. The District 1199 C Training and Upgrading Fund is uniquely qualified to lead this initiative: a labor-management collaboration, it has also directed similar partnerships to enhance educational and career opportunities for thousands of health care workers.

With Bridging Jobs to Careers, the Training Fund will increase employee satisfaction, the number of workers taking benefiting from work-based learning, and the number of workers who are promoted and receive wage increases. As with SSTARreach, the resulting

improvements in morale and employee skill levels will reduce turnover, lower training and recruitment costs, and raise the quality of care delivered in the partnering institutions.

These and other partnerships funded through *Jobs to Careers* seek to make lasting improvements in how they provide career development and advancement opportunities for frontline workers. Developing new models of education and training that incorporate work-based learning will be integral to their success, as will their continued commitment to multi-sector partnerships.

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