

Colorado SECTORS Initiative:

Northwest/Western Colorado Healthcare Initiative

MARCH 2013 CASE STUDY



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COLORADO'S SECTOR INITIATIVE

In May 2009, The Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE) and the Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC) jointly awarded funding to super-regions throughout the state. Funding was provided to regional workforce partnerships to plan a sector strategy, and many of these grantees received additional funding for the implementation of these activities. Since 2009, ten grants have been awarded to target industries including aerospace, healthcare, manufacturing, renewable energy, and water/wastewater management. Sector initiatives are developed through local public-private partnerships, are industry focused, and include workforce development, economic development, education and other stakeholders to address high priority workforce challenges within an industry.

BACKGROUND

Colorado's healthcare sector has been booming in recent years and has served as a main source of economic and job growth for the state. The Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE) anticipates increased demand for registered nurses (RNs), certified nursing assistants (CNAs), licensed practical nurses (LPNs), and other allied health occupations. As demand increases, Colorado has seen a shortage of qualified workers. The reasons for this vary. According to 2009 data from CDLE, an estimated 25% of healthcare workers are projected to leave the profession. High turnover rates have signaled limited opportunity. Fewer young people have entered the field, and those that have tend to occupy high level positions. Even when individuals are interested in pursuing a career in healthcare, they have encountered the limited capacity of many training programs, including state nursing schools, to meet the demand. The industry has historically lacked incremental and systemic career lattices and pathways for advancement, particularly for low-income entry-level workers. Training efforts have also been challenged by Western Colorado's geography which can make travel difficult, especially in the winter.

In 2010, the Northwest/Western workforce super-region had a civilian labor force of 266,169. The sector strategy in this region encompassed Mesa, Northwestern, Rural Resort, and Western workforce investment areas. In 2010, these workforce regions had unemployment rates each over 9%, with Mesa peaking at 10.7% unemployment.¹ The main industries in the region include: health care & social assistance, retail trade, accommodation & food services, education services, and construction.²

The Northwest/Western Colorado Healthcare Initiative was awarded a planning grant in May 2009. The planning grant focused on assessing industry workforce needs and creating training

¹ US Bureau of Labor, 2010

² Distribution of industries in the 4th quarter, 2011 from Labor Market Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages Program

opportunities to meet those needs. This included working with secondary and post-secondary educational partners to customize training curriculum. Crafting the delivery of the curriculum also meant creating a career ladder from CNA upwards. During the planning phase, the partners also teamed with regional workforce centers to screen and assess potential candidates for the industry.

The needs assessment and activities to build capacity conducted under the planning grant lay the foundation for the Northwest/Western Colorado Healthcare Initiative (NWCHI) implementation grant. The grant built on established partnerships and continued the trajectory of the planning grant.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

To meet the growing workforce needs of the healthcare industry, NWCHI's goals included:

- Increasing the numbers of skilled healthcare workers in the collaborating regions;
- Accelerating the credentialing of healthcare workers by developing additional clinical training venues for CNA, LPN, RN, EMT, and MA programs that result in an industry-recognized occupational/professional certification or state license;
- Provision of readily transferable and latticing career development opportunities in healthcare from many points of entry, with easy documentation of the individual's training and certifications.

PARTNERSHIPS

The NWCHI partnership was strong and included experienced representatives from workforce, the healthcare industry, K-12 schools, post-secondary education, and economic development entities (See Appendix A). NWCHI benefited from a decade long history of collaboration and working relationships among the partners - economic development, industry, and the workforce system in the super-region. The partners have served on one another's boards, worked on related task forces, and maintained websites that linked to one another's resources. The sector grant therefore built on and helped to grow an existing system rather than creating something new. It also helped to provide structure and stability to the system.

At each stage of the NWCHI, sector partners used in-person meetings as the structure to communicate, coordinate action, make decisions, and resolve issues. This format, however, posed some problems for the team due to weather conditions and geographic spread. Despite encountering obstacles, the partners remained engaged throughout the grant. Some new partners also joined during the grant.

For example, early in the grant NWCHI lost an educational partner when Colorado Northwestern Community College (CNCC) changed presidents and issues around the delivery of program and curricula could not be resolved. Nevertheless, NWHCI was able to move forward, developing a very successful collaborative partnership with the Western Region Workforce Center and the Mesa State College Montrose Campus (now Colorado Mesa University) to deliver services in that region. They also expanded academic program delivery to the Delta and Montrose workforce areas.

IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

Curriculum Development and Training

During the implementation grant, the NWHCI partnership formed the Medical Laboratory Education Advisory Council, which included laboratory managers from each Western slope hospital, Mesa State science faculty, key representatives from health-related organizations, and interested community members. The group reviewed and gave input on curriculum, timelines, and practicum.

The Medical Officer Manager group, sponsored by the Mesa County Medical Society and the Mesa County Physicians IPA, acted as the Medical Office Assistant Program Advisory Committee. The Medical Office Assistant program began classes in August 2011 at both the Montrose Campus and the Western Colorado Community College campus. Students completed two semesters of college-level course work and began their clinical in the summer of 2012. They graduated in August 2012.

The region's colleges took an active role in the development of the Medical Laboratory Technician program. For example, Mesa State hired a half time employee to help develop curriculum. They also assigned Program Coordinators at the community colleges to help with student advisement and recruitment. The college now offers a number of healthcare related college classes, boasts a number of degrees, and plans to continue expanding on those offerings.

The NWHCI team finalized the Medical Laboratory Technician Program. In March 2012, the Board of Trustees of Colorado Mesa University approved the Medical Laboratory Technician program. Following that approval the State Board also approved the curriculum and college level classes in phlebotomy and applied phlebotomy that began in the summer 2012. Clinical immunology, clinical microscopy, clinical microbiology, and laboratory were launched during the fall 2012 semester.

Finally, NWCHI helped build training capacity by ordering equipment and supplies, and helping to prepare labs at both the Montrose and Grand Junction campuses. Existing lab equipment was also restored and revamped to meet the needs of the new program. Funding for this effort was made available through the grant monies in the implementation grant.

Workforce System Operations

The Workforce Centers (WFCs) played a crucial role in the implementation of training and in the placement of students in programs and jobs. Employers contacted WFCs asking for students with certain skills. The WFCs then contacted students they deemed a good match for the job and encouraged these students to apply. The collaborative efforts of industry and WFCs increased employers' and students' access to one another, and also helped students with enrollment in training programs and/or the employment process. When a student was deemed to be TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) eligible, paid internships were created utilizing TANF funding in order for the student to provide the potential employer with the ability to evaluate their skills and abilities.

In some cases, the WFCs shared costs of curriculum development and/or training of individual students. For example, Western WFC shared the cost of the Med Tech program design.

Outreach and Recruitment

Over the past decade, local education institutions have worked closely with the Mesa County Workforce Center to build educational career ladder and lattices of healthcare. Prior to NWHCI, the regional partners successfully launched training for CNAs, LPNs, RNs, EMTs and Paramedics. The grant built on these past achievements, and worked to build a lattice for medical administration and lab technicians, thereby expanding the existing system. Of particular benefit is the fact that all credits and credentials count toward any program that a student might want to transfer to or advance their training.

The colleges involved in the NWHCI partnership engaged in outreach to, and recruitment of, qualified students. For example, Medical Office Assistant program information was posted on the website for Mesa State College and Western Colorado Community College (WCCC). Training programs were also advertised in local newspapers.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Given the history of collaborative initiatives in the region, the NWHCI team was able to accomplish a tremendous amount in a relatively short amount of time. Strong partnerships with educational institutions enabled the team to develop sector-based curricula based on employer driven needs analysis. In fact, the greatest success of the project was being able to develop two new curricula/programs and gain approval for them over the life of the grant. These two new programs added to the lattices of all of the other established programs.

The expansion of training capacity as a result of these two new programs is another significant accomplishment of NWHCI, as is the further stabilization of the career ladder as it is becoming totally self-sustaining for all programs. The NWHCI team is already working to develop

additional program offerings in other healthcare occupations, e.g. radiology tech assistant, ER tech assistant, laser surgery tech, etc.

The strength of the NWHCI partnership helped to mediate a “midstream” change in program focus from capacity building to tracking training and enrollment into *Connecting Colorado* and WIA.

All 17 students who completed the classroom training in Medical Office Assistant were placed in relevant internships. Every student was hired and some have returned to training at the expense of their employers to enhance their credentialing. Also, several Med Lab Assistant students are currently beginning their second round of training. At this point, every student who began the training is still in training and expected to graduate next year.

Over the past few years, the limited capacity of regional nursing schools to admit all interested candidates has resulted in extended waiting periods. In response to this educational and employment barrier, NWHCI developed an array of trainings and opportunities that were like “spokes” on the professional wheel. While waiting for admission to nursing school or other credential programs, individuals could participate in alternate training that would prepare them for other health related work opportunities. All training received relates to a credit program or a credential in the healthcare field that can be applied toward the advanced degree. For example, if a student starts their healthcare career as a PCP (Personal Care Provider), advances to CNA, advances on to LPN, then all courses and credits from the previous training counts toward the new degree. This provides an opportunity to Nursing School applicants to obtain valuable experience and countable training prior to their entrance into ADN or RN training. An option is also available to transfer credits from LPN to EMT or Paramedic is possible as well as the other way around. This capacity building has developed extensive training lattices for students as well as providing skilled employees for healthcare employers.

IMPACT / RETURN ON INVESTMENT (ROI)

There are some important indications of the grant’s impact on the workforce and the super-region’s healthcare industry.

NWHCI was “able to add to the depth and breadth of the healthcare educational offerings at our educational partners’ facilities.” This will “allow them to train hundreds of individuals to meet the needs of our employers and their patients. We have grounded our career ladder and it is even more stable than it was previously. This is a real win/win for every partner involved.”

Students who had not yet lined up employment as they neared the end of their training in the Medical Office Assistant program stated that they were not anxious about the future. They felt confident about their new skills, and the possibility of assuming new job functions in the months ahead. Some students mentioned their interest in continuing their education to earn an

LPN. Some had decided to reach further up the career ladder, for them the goal was an associate-level RN.

Impact also extends beyond an educational degrees and/or the acquisition of a job. For some participants, the sense of pride and accomplishment about completing a healthcare occupation program was the real reward. One woman shared her family and friends were “thrilled” about her achievement. Another woman spoke of how proud her children were about her accomplishment. She said her training and “graduation” had so much impact on her sixteen year old daughter that her daughter is now planning to go into the medical field.

CHALLENGES

Moving from the planning grant to the implementation grant, the team experienced some schedule delays and thus did not meet all timeline deliverables. The delays were multi-factored including administrative delays. For instance, there was confusion surrounding the contracts that were needed in order to begin the project, therefore delaying the commencement of grant activities.

Other interruptions were regional. As noted above, a change in leadership at CNCC interrupted efforts to implement training there. Fortunately, NWHCI was able to develop an alternative collaborative partnership with Western Region WFC and the Mesa State Montrose Campus. However, this change in venue impacted the time table for the delivery of training curriculum and the launching of training programs.

Gaining approval of curriculum also slowed the project, as multiple accreditations were needed. Nonetheless, NWHCI is proud of its ability to get approval to launch both the Medical Office Assistant and the Medical Laboratory Technician Program during the grant.

There was also some confusion about grant goals and targets. As a result, NWHCI did not engage in tracking students, or enrolling them into *Connecting Colorado* and WIA, until well into the academic first year. However, given the numbers enrolled in the grant funded program, staff was able to capture 17 students and their information including WIA status, course completion, employment and wage history.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Clarity and documentation of grant goals.** The NWHCI team learned how important it is to ensure that the focus of the grant, whether it is training or capacity building, is understood by all parties. Clear and consistent information early on and clarity, not only about goals but how they will be achieved, is critical for success in meeting the expectations of funding organizations/agencies.

- **Involve all designated partners early in the project.** In multi-region projects it is important that all regions are brought to the table, especially if there is historic inequality in partnering with different regions. NWHCI's strong partnerships with the Northwest region were positive and the eventual development of the partnership with the Western Region added a new depth to the delivery of trainings throughout two major regions.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Engage industry at all levels** of program and curriculum development. Their input is critical if the developed programs are to meet industry needs. Being industry driven is what has made this multi-year and multi-program continuum successful.
- **Establish training/career lattices and pipelines.** Create a pipeline and diversify offerings to accommodate students on waiting lists. This will give students additional knowledge and experience about the healthcare field, and may lead to employment in the field prior to their completion of a credential or degree.
- **Consistent leadership and commitment.** It is important that the highest level of leadership in an agency/institution - healthcare and/or education and/or business – is involved in discussions about any planned project involving the agency/institution. Without explicit buy-in from leadership, a project cannot be implemented and/or fully successful.
- **Create a strong foundation so building is possible in the future.** The partnership benefited from a solid foundation, and culture of collaboration, which enabled them to progress quickly at every stage of the project from planning through implementation.
- Team members noted that it is important to “**stand and deliver**” on commitments to the business community. This creates legitimacy and facilitates the establishment of trust, from which future opportunities can develop.

FINANCIAL AND LEVERAGED RESOURCES

Grant funds were used to fund the programming as were leveraged dollars.

NWHCI received a planning grant of \$75,000 and an implementation grant of \$200,207 from CDLE. Western Colorado Community College/Colorado Mesa University provided \$1375 in in-kind support which reflects staff time, materials, and equipment. Additional equipment for outfitting the labs at both campuses was funded from the grant and provided for the continuation of these training sites.

SUSTAINABILITY

It is the full expectation of the NWHCI that the training programs it helped to establish will become self-sustaining, just as the previously created training programs for, CNA, LPN, ADN, EMT and Paramedic have been sustained.

Dollars from the grant were used to develop physical structures such as classrooms, labs, and storage needed to support the programs and students. Now that these elements are in place they will serve beyond the life of the grant.

Through tuition and fees, industry employer support, existent WIA funds, and the Colorado Mesa University Foundation endowment for the Healthcare Science Center, the training programs in Medical Assistant and Medical Lab Technician will have the necessary funding to be ongoing at Western Colorado Community College/Colorado Mesa University.

The NWHCI is looking forward to creating and advancing other healthcare training opportunities such as Radiology Tech Assistant and ER Tech Assistant. The overall group continues to meet, as do smaller more specifically focused groups related to localized training needs. From this collaboration, additional training needs will be identified.

Finally, the region has long had success in sector partnerships and it is the “culture” of how they do business. They recently received a U.S. Department of Commerce grant focused on the manufacturing industry. The new grant, a capacity expansion project, will build “educational program offerings at the community college for robotic machinist training as well as chrome plating technician training.” The Healthcare Continuum partnership model is being used to expand the manufacturing training opportunities.

Sue Tuffin, Director of the Mesa Workforce Center and NWHCI project lead summed up the partnership most succinctly: “Sector is just a word or a phrase unless you institutionalize the collaboration and business driven and performance based approaches that are needed. So really it is all in the doing.”

ABOUT

Rutgers University's School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR) is the leading source of expertise on the world of work, building effective and sustainable organizations, and the changing employment relationship. The school is comprised of two departments—one focused on all aspects of strategic human resource management and the other dedicated to the social science specialties related to labor studies and employment relations. In addition, SMLR provides many continuing education and certificate programs taught by world-class researchers and expert practitioners. For more information, visit www.smlr.rutgers.edu

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APPENDIX A

Northwest/Western Colorado Healthcare Initiative Partners:

- Workforce Investment System – Mesa County Workforce Center (Board), Western Colorado Workforce Region (Board), Rural Resort Workforce Region (Board)
- Community and Technical Colleges – Western Colorado Community College (Grand Junction Campus and Montrose Campus), Colorado Mesa University, Colorado Mountain College, Colorado Northwestern Community College, Delta-Montrose Technical College
- Employers and Industry-Related Organizations – St. Mary’s Hospital, Community Hospital, Glenwood Hospital, Rifle Hospital, Delta Memorial Hospital, Montrose Hospital, Family Health West, Home Care of the Grand Valley, Western health Care Alliance, Western Colorado health Care Education Center, Hilltop Community Resources, Larchwood Inns, Hospice and Palliative Care of Western Colorado, Physician’s Association, and others.
- Continuum of Education-Colorado Mesa University, Western Colorado Community College, Pueblo Community College Western Slope Campus, Delta County School District 50, Mesa County School District 51, Garfield County School District, Montrose County School District, and others.

APPENDIX B

ACTIVITY	TOTAL PLANNED	TOTAL ACTUAL	% OF GOAL
Entered training	21	19	90%
Completed training	18	17	94%
Earned certificate or industry credential	18	17	94%