



The Berkshire Eagle

\$218,000 grant to help address certified nursing assistant shortage in Berkshires

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By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — The Berkshires has a shortage of certified nursing assistants, and local workforce providers hear about it all the time.

"I don't have the numbers, but we held a health care advisory committee meeting last month and every single one of [the attendees] have openings," said Shannon Zayac, industry relations manager for the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board. "Many of them have a couple of hundred hours CNAs need to fill."

The workforce board is taking steps to alleviate that problem: It recently received a two-year, \$218,000 state grant to address this chronic local shortage of certified nursing assistants.

The funding is scheduled for the Berkshire Nursing Assistant program, a partnership between Berkshire health care employers, educators and other local workforce development entities that is intended to educate and train 70 local Certified Nursing Assistants over the next two years. The program will begin in February.

It will establish both daytime and online CNA programs, with weekly support services to address the county's growing and persistent problem of nursing assistant shortages.

CNAs provide hands-on health care to patients in medical settings, performing tasks like turning bedridden patients or taking a patient's vital signs. They work in hospitals, but mostly are found in nursing or residential care facilities.

Unlike some other nursing positions, CNAs are not required to obtain a college degree, but they are required to obtain a nondegree certificate or a diploma.

The online program, which was approved by the state Department of Public Health, will be the first of its kind in the state, according to the Berkshire Workforce Board. It was set up to provide opportunities for those residing in rural areas of the Berkshires who can't attend evening training sessions because of transportation issues. The Berkshire initiative has been set up as a pilot program.

"Right now, there's only a nighttime program — Berkshire Health Systems does a program from 4:30 to 9 at night," Zayac said. "But working mothers can't reach it, [nor] can people who don't have transportation. We're hoping the daytime and online program get people who are interested but can't do it yet."

The trainings and services provided for in the grant are free for participants, and are geared toward unemployed and underemployed Berkshire residents.

"With DPH approval, we are looking forward to offering a unique, blended training program that provides flexibility, quality education and conveniences," Debbie Richardson, vice president of talent management at Berkshire Health Systems, said in a statement.

BHS, the county's largest employer, is one of the entities involved in the partnership, which also includes workforce professionals, social service agencies and career development agencies. Berkshire Health Systems will provide the daytime program.

"We are addressing the CNA workforce shortages by blending professional instructors with technology and accessibility to make becoming a CNA easier than before," Richardson said.

"This is a major win," said Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyer. "It's a crucial step that will help to equip and strengthen our local workforce, setting them on a path of personal and professional excellence."

The project is funded by a Senator Kenneth J. Donnelly Workforce Success grant through a fiscal 2019 workforce competitive trust fund appropriation administered through the state Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

It is one of 18 projects funded by this program across the state. Eleven of those grants focus on health care training opportunities.

For more information, visit masshireberkshire.com or call 413-442-7177 ext. 118.

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