A shortage of healthcare workers and a skills gap in the healthcare workforce spans across Alaska’s six economic regions, and has hit rural and native communities especially hard. Combined with the lack of career pathways and training available in the healthcare field, rising healthcare costs, and the need to increase efficiency in the use of health insurance to reduce overall healthcare costs, the State Apprenticeship Expansion grant came along at just the right time.

Building off momentum created under other initiatives, AKDOLWD strengthened its partnership with the Alaska Primary Care Association (APCA) to open apprenticeship opportunities in four new healthcare occupations: Community Health Worker, Clinical Medical Assistant, Medical Administrative Assistant, and Billing and Coding Specialist. APCA is a private, nonprofit training and technical assistance organization of Alaska’s “safety-net” primary care providers with a mission of “helping to create healthy communities by supporting vibrant and effective community health centers” in Alaska. With members that include federally-designated Section 330 Community Health Centers across the state, and a focus on providing primary care services to the underinsured, uninsured, and those living in medically underserved areas, dozens of employers can be quickly mobilized to implement apprenticeships. Collaborating with this large and established network of healthcare employers created economies of scale that would be impossible to replicate without the APCA partnership.

Another key component important to the initiative is online learning. Alaska is a rural state, the 4th least populous in the United States, with the largest land mass. Small rural and tribal communities that are only accessible by plane or boat exceed 200 in number. The logistics make it unfeasible to bring educators to the students and vice versa. Online learning allows students to complete both their work-based learning and their related instruction directly in the community where they live and work – no matter how remote. Web-based instruction created opportunities for Alaskans who live in remote and rural communities to apprentice in occupations that never would have been available before. This may serve to reduce the outmigration of young native and rural Alaskans who in the past have left home to seek work in urban areas where training and jobs are more readily available.

In an effort to ensure the success of participants, the program has also implemented a distance mentoring component to provide the needed support for apprentices, along with modified curriculum in some cases where apprentices do not have access to the internet. APCA’s staff, including an apprenticeship coordinator and statewide mentor for Billing and Coding Specialists, provide one-on-one support to supplement distance delivery of curriculum.

Our mission is socio-economic. We want to help people move into the middle class and stay in the middle class.

- Zack Fields, Workforce Development Coordinator
Alaska Dept. of Labor and Workforce Development
ADVICE TO OTHER STATES

• Tap New Networks. AKDOLWD multiplied its reach into local and rural communities by utilizing and building upon their ongoing relationship with APCA. With the organization’s network of 27 community health center grantee organizations (14 of them tribally operated) that run 170 clinics, Alaskans across the state can apprentice in their own communities, learning and earning where they live. As noted by APCA staff, “One of the reasons this has been so well-received is because it meets people where they are, literally and figuratively.”

• Bring Apprenticeship to Underserved Populations. Opportunities for training and jobs in tribal communities are limited, and the rates of unemployment are high. In building this model, Alaska expanded apprenticeships to its rural populations and created a ready workforce to support access to healthcare in its remote communities. The Statewide Apprenticeship Coordinator describes it this way: “The whole idea is for employers to have home grown apprentices and that creates a stable community and robust job growth.”

• Build System Capacity. AKWOLWD is aligning programs and policies and leveraging funding across multiple grants – State Apprenticeship Expansion, American Apprenticeship Initiative, and Sector Partnership-National Emergency grants from the U.S. Department of Labor – to grow apprenticeship in healthcare. Their approach is to build the state’s system capacity for apprenticeships in the healthcare sector, including increasing capacity of a key industry intermediary, in order to sustain the work beyond the life of these grants.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR REPLICATION

• Increase Awareness. The world of apprenticeship was unknown to many healthcare partners, and it has taken a paradigm shift to understand the apprenticeship model and how it works in the healthcare sector. Making initial and ongoing investments in information sharing and staff training on apprenticeship will raise awareness and advance the goals of the partnership.

• Improve Healthcare. Apprenticeships in nontraditional healthcare occupations can have a big impact on the quality of healthcare and the healthcare system overall. Communities with an ample and qualified healthcare workforce can be a major contributor to the retention of healthcare providers. In addition, a team-based care model that includes Community Health Workers who provide coordinated care and assistance to chronic care patients can decrease the incidence of emergency room use, and reduce overall healthcare costs – especially for those on Medicaid.

• Seek Alternatives. High-quality broadband with sufficient speed and reliability is not available in every rural community. Alternative learning modalities for related instruction for apprenticeships, such as “hard-copies” of curriculum, may need to be offered in place of web-based learning platforms that use streaming videos or other high data-use tools.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Since APCA has already met its enrollment target for the first cohort of 117 apprentices, APCA and the state are preparing for the second cohort. The state is reaching out to additional potential employers of Community Health Workers (such as hospitals) so that benefits of Community Health Worker employment can extend beyond federally qualified health centers.

To learn more about the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, visit:  
http://www.jobs.state.ak.us/apprentice

To learn more about the Alaska Primary Care Association’s apprenticeship program, visit:  http://www.alaskapca.org/apprenticeship

CONTACT

Zack Fields, Workforce Development Coordinator  
Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development  
zack.fields@alaska.gov