

Nursing training opportunities abound in wake of staff shortages

BY MATT JONES
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MILTON — Amidst ongoing health care worker shortages across Pennsylvania — including a major shortfall of registered nurses and nursing staff — there is also a boom in training and educational opportunities throughout the Susquehanna River Valley.

“We have the capacity to serve more than we’re currently serving,” said Dr. Bernadette Boerckel, chief outreach officer for

the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit (CSIU). “There’s not a lot of awareness about what is available to help solve this problem.”

One of the resources available to help solve health care worker shortage problems comes from the Central Susquehanna LPN Career Center, an accredited Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) institution in Milton.

The center, which has

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Linda Walker, a registered nurse, tours one of the training classrooms at the LPN Career Center.

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classrooms onsite, offers full-time and part-time LPN programs, which take one year and two years to complete, respectively.

“The LPN program is a great deal for someone looking to get into nursing. Graduates have a starting salary of \$45,000 and a 94% placement rate after graduation,” Boerckel said. “We also, at the LPN center, have dual enrollment, so our high school juniors and seniors can come and take classes with our LPN students while they’re in high school, which allows them, if they decide to come to the LPN center later, to not to take those classes while they’re here.”

But it’s more than just LPN training that is available at the center.

“We offer pathways into health care,” said Boerckel. “And there are many ways to enter and to exit off of that pathway.”

One of those entry points into the health care field is as a certified nursing assistant (CNA).

“The nurse aide training program is an approved Pennsylvania Department of Education training. Nurse aid training prepares you to take the certification to become a CNA,” said Ann Miller, nursing aide training program coordinator.

The CNA course is short and intensive, covering 125 hours of instruction and clinical experience in 19 days.

“In 19 days, an individual, from day one through day 12, will be in a classroom learning and in a lab doing hands-on practice,” Miller said. “And then days 13 through 19, they are in a long-term care facility giving care to residents. So again, in 19 days, you’ll pretty much know whether you think the nursing field is for you.”

While four-year programs typically prepare graduates to work as registered nurses, the nurse aide training program allows newcomers to test the waters of the health care field while learning the skills that enable future opportunities for advancement.

“A CNA is a wonderful profession to springboard into other nursing entities,” said Linda Walker, a registered nurse and CSIU’s health care education coordinator. “I think nurses make better nurses coming in under that CNA because they learn how to care and take care of people.”

The LPN Career Center is also a physical location

for Pennsylvanians to test for their CNA certification.

“Here, within the CSIU, we saw a need in this local region to have a testing site which, in Pennsylvania, nurse aides go through a program called Credentia. They test for the written and the clinical to become CNAs. We’re an approved Credentia regional test site,” said Katherine Vastine, the CARES leadership coordinator at CSIU.

“No one was really providing this service in the area. You have people training to become CNAs all over the state but very few places to get your testing,” Boerckel said. “You may want to get a four-year degree, a bachelor’s in nursing, but if you start this way, often your employer will help you pay for that as you go. All of our hospitals around here have great tuition reimbursement programs as they’re upskilling their staff.”

With the addition of a \$3 million Supporting Your Needs in Community Healthcare grant, CSIU has partnered with Geisinger and northcentral and northeast Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) to implement community health worker training programs.

While community health worker is a relatively new occupational title, it is a certified position through the Pennsylvania Certification Board.

Community health workers are members of the community who help connect individuals to the resources and health care services in their area, such as health care, housing, shelter, food and arranging doctor’s appointments.

“Part of the purpose of the grant is to create the awareness of what a community health worker is and does,” Vastine said. “It’s also about recruiting community health workers. Through the grant, we’re able to pay the tuition for the individual to complete the training, the 75 hours of theory and 2,000 hours of the on-the-job training, and to pay the certification.

“But also, individuals are able to earn stipends as they’re going through the training.”

For those interested in learning more about the LPN, CNA, and community health worker programs, the Central Susquehanna LPN Career Center is hosting an open house from 2 to 6 p.m. April 20 at 15 Lawton Lane, Milton.

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